A call to arms—Demonstrators deride school board’s inaction

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Prince Frederic, MD - A crowd of over 100—parents, students, elected officials and concerned citizens—rallied Monday morning, March 26 in front of Calvert County Public Schools’ (CCPS) Administration Building on Dares Beach Road in Prince Frederic. The noise under the glaring sun on a busy road was in marked contrast to the silence in a nearly empty hearing room Thursday, March 22 when the local school board wrapped up what up to that point had been a routine work session. During the board comments segment, member Kelly McConkey made a motion to allow CCPS safety advocates—some of whom are retired police officers—to be armed while on the job. McConkey’s motion was prompted by the ongoing angst of parents, students and teachers in the wake of recent gun violence in other school districts. The latest such incident occurred March 20 in St. Mary’s County, costing one student her life. The gunman, also a student, also died as a result of the incident. The motion to grant the qualified advocates carry permission did not receive a second from any of the other three Board of Education (BOE) members present at the work session.

As demonstrators held handmade signs on the side of the road, one of the event organizers, Mike Rubalsky of Huntingtown, stood on the bed of a pickup truck and called for a action and a change in policy. “Schools are a place where children are supposed to feel safe,” said Rubalsky. “Every single person in the county should care. Words do not stop bullets. We need armed people on every school property.”

Prior to the start of the rally, Calvert County Commissioner Mike Hart [R – District 1] spoke with TheBayNet.com and expressed frustration with the current BOE’s responses to his (Hart’s) efforts to intervene on public school issues brought to him by constituents. He reiterated those feelings when he addressed the crowd, lamenting the school board majority’s unwillingness to discuss McConkey’s proposal. Of the widely circulated video of the BOE’s March 22 board comments segment, Hart concluded, “I think the video speaks for itself.”

Another county commissioner, Board Vice President Tom Hejl [R - At large] made mention of his 40 years of law enforcement experience and admitted he still frequently carries a gun for protection. “I saw a lot of tragedy in my life,” said Hejl. “I don’t want to see it in this county.” Hejl told the crowd his daughter is a school teacher and he indicated the current BOE majority’s reticence on the safety issue was not acceptable. “You need to get rid of this school board,” Hejl told the cheering crowd.

“I am passionate about the safety of our kids,” said retired Calvert County Sheriff’s Office Sergeant and Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) Officer Mike Bomgardner. “We can arm these safety advocates. Right now you are paying $40,000 a year for a safety advocate to be a ‘good witness.’ ” Bomgardner affirmed that some school board members’ concerns about making the school system vulnerable to legal action if CCPS employees are allowed to carry weapons “is an invalid argument. Law suits are going to happen.”

Prior to Bomgardner’s remarks, Hejl mentioned that the retired D.A.R.E. officer might be a write-in candidate in the upcoming BOE election. Two incumbents—Pamela Cousins, who did not attend the work session; and William Phalen, who has been repeatedly lampooned for plugging a school play instead of responding to McConkey’s motion during the work session—are the only candidates who filed for the two open seats on the board prior to last month’s deadline. Should McConkey win his race for county commissioner in November a third vacancy on the school board would be created.

“I thought I could have confidence in the higher-ups,” said Northern High School senior Gavin Hill, who also expressed dismay at the BOE’s lack of action. “This is not a topic to be discarded.”

Perhaps the strongest repudiation of the school board majority voiced at the rally came from McConkey, who told the crowd the other members present knew he was going to bring up the subject and make a motion. “This is not something they were surprised by;” said McConkey. “It was almost like they were trying to intentionally shut me down.” Noting that all four high schools have armed liaison officers from the sheriff’s office on-site but other schools did not, McConkey declared, “our elementary and middle schools are sitting ducks.”

In a letter that was sent out hours after the demonstration, BOE President Tracey McGuire responded to the criticism. “The board is working with the board of county commissioners to fund school construction projects to make buildings more difficult to access,” McGuire stated. “We are providing additional training to staff on responding to an active shooter. In consultation with the sheriff’s office, we are exploring additional law enforcement supports in schools. CCPS also coordinates with the Health Department to provide mental health services to students in schools. At the state level, the board, through the Maryland Associations of Boards of Education, is advocating for amendments to improve legislation to provide Maryland State Police resources to schools, as well as other safety measures. As we, as a community, consider what is the next best thing we can do to keep our children safe in school, the fact is most gun deaths are accidental shootings or suicide. A majority of the Board believes more guns on school property increase those risks and thus do not support arming CCPS employees. The board will continue to consider how best to keep children in school safe, unafraid, welcome, and ready to learn.”

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