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Pennridge community supports teachers, slams school board in heated exchange

The board and the community repeatedly clashed over public comment rules, culminating in a 45 minute recess.



Pennridge parents and community members attend a May school board meeting. (John Worthington – MediaNews Group)



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PUBLISHED: May 12, 2023 at 11:33 a.m. | UPDATED: May 12, 2023 at 11:40 a.m.

EAST ROCKHILL — Pennridge teachers received an outpouring of support from the community Wednesday evening at a volatile school board meeting in which community members slammed the board for disrespecting and underpaying teachers.

The show of support was punctuated with repeated clashes between the school board and the community over public comment rules, with the board attempting to restrict the first public comment period to agenda items up for a vote and community members accusing the board of trying to silence dissent. The clashes culminated in a 45-minute recess in which the Perkasie police were called to the school.



The heated meeting comes as the school board has advanced several controversial policies targeting teachers, including [a ban](#) on teacher advocacy and a proposed [“opt-in” policy](#) for school surveys on “controversial issues.” The board additionally [approved](#) a curriculum consulting contract with Vermilion Education LLC, a five-month-old Michigan firm with no public school experience, which was widely condemned and called an insult to the expertise and experience of teachers.

The school board and the Pennridge Education Association (PEA), the Pennridge teachers’ union, are also in the middle of contract negotiations, with the school board recently proposing a 2% salary increase. Teachers argue the proposal amounts to a pay cut when factoring in changes to health insurance contributions and inflation and will keep Pennridge teachers as the lowest paid in Bucks County.

In light of these events, a large crowd came out in force to Wednesday’s school board meeting to show support for the district’s teachers and implore the school board to start valuing and properly compensating them. Many attendees were PEA members.

As the first public comment period began, one speaker after another took the podium to praise Pennridge teachers for their hard work and dedication.

“Sue Hanson is a reading specialist at Guth Elementary. This woman is a literal magician,” said a mother. “Our Morgan could not and would not read. This woman honed in on this child and created not only a reader but a resilient student who doesn’t give up when she is behind or when she is confused.”

“I would like to highlight Mrs. Ruggiero,” said another mother. “She makes sure that every child has what they need to succeed in her class. On many occasions, she has paid for items for the class out of her own pocket. She not only supports her students but makes an effort to attend their extracurricular activities for support.”

“Mr. Cousineau is my history teacher this year and has had me grow so much academically,” said a high school student. “If anyone needed help with something, his door was always open. He was the only history teacher who told me I was too hard on myself after one not so great essay and that meant something to me.”

“If I were to describe Mrs. Stellino in one word, it would be marvelous,” said a middle school student. “She uses her free time to run rehearsals for us to be prepared for auditions and our performance in March. She also challenges us with special projects to help us grow in skill and confidence. She listens to our ideas and encourages us to try new things.”

On another note, Matt Carbonaro of Perkasio applauded board members for keeping their promise of fiscal responsibility by proposing a budget with no tax increases. He additionally expressed mixed feelings about the Vermilion contract, proclaiming support for the firm but disagreeing with the contract’s cost and rushed approval process.

“Going back to fiscal responsibility and keeping your promises, you should be more up front with what you’re doing and have contracts that are more defined for the taxpayers and the community at hand,” said Carbonaro.

Laura Foster of East Rockhill began her comment by blasting the school board for approving the Vermilion contract over unified public opposition with little notice. She demanded that the contract be terminated.

“This is a blatant attempt to push personal agendas without proper scrutiny,” said Foster.

Board solicitor Kevin Skjoldal quickly interjected, ruling Foster out-of-order for discussing a non-agenda item during the first public comment period. He said that such items can only be discussed during the second public comment period at the end of the meeting.

Foster, however, noted that a previous speaker mentioned Vermilion without interruption and proceeded with her comment, prompting an outburst from board member Megan Banis-Clemens.

“You are out of order!” shouted Banis-Clemens. “And if you don’t stop, the security is gonna come in.”

Banis-Clemens then abruptly called a recess and stormed out, followed by Skjoldal and board members David Reiss, Jordan Blomgren, Ricki Chaikin and Bob Cormack. The board members who voted against the Vermilion contract remained on the stage. Perkasio police were called to the school during the recess.

After approximately 45 minutes, the board reconvened. Skjoldal reiterated that the first public comment period is restricted to agenda items and instructed comments on non-agenda items to be held until the end of the meeting.

As the public comment period resumed, Emily Smith of East Rockhill accused board members of backroom scheming, devising secret deals and trading favors for votes. She accused the board of micromanaging every aspect of students’ school experiences, citing the board’s decision to label the NOVA Safe Touch Presentation as a “controversial topic” in need of board approval.

Skjoldal interrupted to reiterate the public comment rules. As he spoke, Smith repeatedly acknowledged her understanding of the rules.

“Next time you speak over me, I’m going to ask you to be removed,” said Skjoldal.

“Do you have that right?” asked Smith.

In defiance, Smith finished her public comment. She said the board's misplaced priorities have tanked the district's ranking, flying in the face of members' concerns about fiscal responsibility.

"The value of my home is tied to the reputation of this district, and I have to sit here and watch you fight about personal political agendas instead of talking about our test scores and rankings," said Smith. "You're destroying our reputation and the value of my home will fall with it."

Stephanie Regina criticized the board for restricting the public comment period, pointing out that high school students and teachers have a 7:15 a.m. start time and cannot stay until the end of the meeting. She said the board should have used its discretion to move the second public period up in the agenda to accommodate the speakers.

"We are having a crisis. That's why we're here. We're not here because we find this fascinating," said Regina. "I did want to shout out to our teachers because it's just deplorable what we're putting them through."

While a handful of individuals left, the majority of the crowd stayed for the second public comment period at the end of the meeting.

Katie Rene of Perkasio commended the teachers for their hard work, selflessness and resilience in the face of the board's misplaced priorities and political agenda. She described teachers as the one resource without which the school cannot function and criticized the board for mistreating them.

Dakota Murtha of Hilltown, a high school student, lauded her Pennridge teachers, specifically her history teacher, Bob Cousineau. She said Cousineau made her proud to be American, in contrast to the board's assumptions. She urged the board to show genuine appreciation for the teachers.

"Maybe let's do a little bit more for teacher appreciation week than just giving them coupons to local stores," said Murtha. "Maybe help them out with those contracts."

Tim Deose, a high school social studies teacher, mentioned that he has repeatedly served as Teacher Association president and participated in numerous contract negotiations over the years.

"In all my years teaching at Pennridge, I have never seen this level of frustration from my fellow Pennridge Education Association members," said Deose. "The Pennridge professional staff are the lowest paid educators in the entire county of Bucks, and it's time for a change."

Jim Valletta, another high school social studies teacher and chief negotiator for the PEA, urged the board to roll up its sleeves and negotiate a contract by the end of June that can attract and retain high quality teachers. He said the union plans to meet with the board on May 22.

"In Pennsylvania, the 66% drop in the certification of educators in the last decade suggests a looming crisis," said Valletta. "These are the very people who are most needed to staff Pennridge schools now and in the future. Let's get to work."

Following public comment, Banis-Clemens accused the PEA of publicizing false information to rile up the community ahead of the primary election. She stressed that the contract is a first proposal but claimed it is higher than any previous initial proposal, eliciting loud groans from teachers, many of whom began walking out. She characterized the teacher's proposal of 5% annual raises as unreasonable.

"I'm done," said an exasperated teacher as she walked out of the auditorium.

The next Pennridge school board meeting is on June 12 at 7 p.m. For more information, visit pennridge.org.

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