

NATIONAL REVIEW

School-Board Candidate with a National Platform Is Urging Fellow Reformers to Keep It Local

September 24, 2021

Isaac Schorr

One of the ironies of the burgeoning education-reform movement sweeping across the nation is that it is its opponents, not its foot soldiers, who are most keen on nationalizing individual races.

Take Ilya Shapiro's run for school board in Falls Church, Va. By virtue of his position as a vice president of the prominent libertarian think tank the Cato Institute who announced his candidacy in the *Wall Street Journal*, Shapiro can likely call himself the most famous candidate for a municipal board of education in the country. But while his campaign may be known to the nation, it's local issues that are animating it.

Shapiro isn't spending "all of the free time I don't have" — his words — running for office because he was frustrated by teachers' unions in Chicago, or because he objects to what's being taught in history classes in San Francisco. He's running because of the problems plaguing his own community.

Last year, while students languished through virtual instruction, the Falls Church school board devoted its time, energy, and resources not to returning to the classroom, but to surveying the community to determine whether school buildings honoring Thomas Jefferson and George Mason should be renamed — and unanimously plowed ahead with their iconoclastic act despite the survey returning a resounding answer in the negative.

In January, he joined Falls Church City Parents 4 Schools, a group advocating a full reopening of schools, and applied for a sudden opening on the board, which was to be filled by the remaining

members. He was not selected. In March, he tried again with the same result. If change was to come, it would have to come from the outside.

Though it was personal experience and eye-level mismanagement that drove him into the fray, Shapiro acknowledges that his story is “part of a larger narrative of discontent with local governance, with school boards, with certain structural weaknesses that COVID revealed.”

And yet, he seems determined not to let overarching fights playing out on cable news — and even in other Virginia school districts — become central to his campaign, instead opting for a hyper-disciplined strategy. Shapiro contrasted his role as an outcome-driven ideological advocate in his day job with his process-oriented candidacy, telling *National Review* that “I’m trying to preserve our excellent schools, but while making the school board more accountable and more responsive.”

“I don’t have a big agenda to impose lots of different reforms on the schools; I want to reform the school board,” he added.

If elected, Shapiro would not, for example, come into office intent on reversing guidelines pertaining to transgender students set by the Virginia board of education, which some local boards have resisted. “We haven’t had actual controversy over that here; it hasn’t come up either in the context of pronouns, or school sports, or bathrooms. . . . Until and unless there’s a problem that arises — from whichever direction — I don’t think we need to stir the pot in any way,” Shapiro explained, noting that “a lot of these things can be negotiated, in a less heated way, among individuals.”

On critical race theory (CRT) too, Shapiro is presenting himself not as a fire-breathing partisan, but as a bridge builder. “The CRT debate is often people talking past each other,” he says, asserting that he doesn’t want to focus on nomenclature, but specifics. And specifically, he endorses filling in gaps and blind spots in the educational system — such as the Tulsa Massacre and Juneteenth — without resorting to the kind of reflexive progressivism that resulted in the sudden, reflexive shunning of Jefferson and Mason.

“What I don’t like is teaching students to identify themselves or each other through racial lenses, to teach through shame and guilt, hierarchies of intersectionality and privilege, dividing people up into oppressor and oppressed classes. These sorts of things are I don’t think pedagogically helpful, and they’re certainly divisive,” said Shapiro.

He doesn’t see his positions on these issues as hedging or compromising his values, but merely understanding the role he’s running for.

“I’m just recognizing that my views on the Voting Rights Act or abortion or the Second Amendment . . . none of these things matter for the local school board, so I’m trying to be laser-focused on ‘what are parents concerned about?’”

As a result, his campaign is focused on bread-and-butter educational issues affecting Falls Church, rather than on becoming just another front in the national culture war.

Despite Shapiro’s zeroing in on more relevant, substantive problems, his opponents in the local press have zoomed out, trying to link him — by word association and sans evidence — with the January 6 Capitol riot and Donald Trump’s broader attempts to overturn the 2020 presidential election.

According to a *Falls Church News Press* endorsement editorial, Shapiro’s candidacy is part of the Republican Party’s decision to go “‘all in’ with Trumpism,” citing his employment by the dubiously described “rightwing” Cato Institute. The *News Press*’s editorial — which elides altogether local and educational issues in favor of decrying the state of the national GOP — did not, as you might imagine, end with an endorsement of Shapiro. Notably, the *News Press* came to its decision before even a single candidate forum has been held.

To the *News Press*’s chagrin, though, Shapiro believes the newspaper’s unfounded and, to his mind, irrelevant attacks are a boon to his campaign. He says that aside from the activist class, most people are “turned off” by those kinds of attacks.

“I’ve had people emailing me, making donations, asking for yard signs, coming up to me at the farmers’ market where I go every Saturday morning to campaign, and saying ‘I never heard of you. I don’t have strong views on the school board, but I just read a little bit about this, and it’s ridiculous and your measured response is commendable’ . . . and they’re supporting me,” Shapiro said.

“Maybe I need to report in my next campaign-finance report to the state board of elections the editor of the paper as an in-kind contributor to my campaign,” he joked.

Time will tell whether that contribution is ultimately decisive in securing Shapiro a spot on the board, but he already has a clear message for reform-minded school-board candidates planning on running in seemingly inhospitable areas such as Falls Church in the coming years: Keep It Local, Stupid.

“Every community is different, so you have to really understand what the issues are, what people are happy with, what they’re unhappy with,” he says. For his part, Shapiro has identified the opportunities being given students in the middle — those who are neither extraordinarily gifted, nor have special needs — to be a major concern for the parents of Falls Church, a concern he came to understand only as a result of many conversations with them. Speaking to those issues that are only identifiable as a result of persistent effort is a tell for voters.

Word-for-word messaging and the composition of coalitions may not be replicable across all races, but process and intentions are.

“I don’t have any agenda beyond: ‘If not me, who? If not now, when?’” says Shapiro. Many parents will ask themselves those same questions over the coming years. It is not only how they answer, but how they act upon those answers that will determine whether they will bear any fruit.