



Controversial Op-Ed Puts F.C. Schools In Spotlight

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July 8, 2021

The Falls Church School Board has found itself plunged into the angry national debate about the priorities of school systems thanks to an op-ed published in the *Wall Street Journal* over the holiday weekend.

It was penned by recently-qualified Falls Church School Board candidate and City resident Ilya Shapiro, who was invited to write his July 3 commentary “The Local School Board is Unaccountable, So I’m Running for a Seat.” In it, he is critical of the City’s current board and Superintendent Dr. Peter Noonan.

It’s a debate that’s become far angrier than folks in Falls Church have been used to, with it escalating in Loudoun County recently when a veritable shouting and shoving match occurred at a school board meeting there and one person was arrested.

Instead, Falls Church has dealt with problems and controversies associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and the unanimous decision by the F.C. board to change the name of two of the City’s five public schools that had been named for Revolutionary Era founders who owned slaves.

(The old George Mason High is now Meridian High and the old Thomas Jefferson Elementary is now Oak Street School).

There have been grim externalities from this rising temperature that’s now affecting the Little City. A member of the Falls Church School Board has received a death threat from an unknown source, believed by school officials not to be local in its origin given its “tone and voice.”

Members of the local School Board have listened to the threat posted in a voicemail. Police have been notified and Noonan has requested that the City provide security at its School Board meetings.

Shapiro, who is a national leader and vice president of the right-libertarian Cato Institute based in Washington, D.C., accuses the F.C. School Board of having “other priorities” in the face of

pressures from some parents “about getting their kids back to in-person learning” in the commentary.

The F.C. Board, he claimed, “repeatedly deferred to the superintendent on pandemic policy and instead debated whether to change the names” of the two aforementioned schools.

He accused the board of being “oblivious to public sentiment” in the face of an unofficial poll which showed a majority of those asked wanting to keep the Mason and Jefferson names.

Still, he wrote, this “was the tip of the iceberg” in the face of what he called a “brewing discontent” among some parents about “the lack of school-board response on all sorts of concerns.” He claimed that “on pandemic response, we were always a step behind.” He accused Superintendent Noonan of “moving the goalposts” on the matter, and the school renamings “added insult to injury.”

Shapiro’s appeal to a national audience and general attack on the current board and administrative leadership fits the pattern identified by the New York Times as “a culture war brawl that has spilled into the country’s educational system” led by Republicans “at the state, local and national levels.”

A May article in the online Axios newsletter noted that “what was traditionally a nonpartisan, hyper-local role is now at the center of a swirling national political debate,” noting that “grassroots conservative groups are getting involved in school board races all across the country.”

But Shapiro’s placement of his local school board candidacy in such a context has not gone over so well in Falls Church thus far, especially his criticisms of what goes on here before a national stage.

Strongest in his comments in the past week has been longtime Falls Church City Councilman and former Mayor David Snyder, himself a Republican.

Snyder, whose statement is published in full elsewhere in this edition, wrote, “All voices need to be listened to, and I am committed to that. On the other hand, I must challenge negative, unfair and inaccurate stereotypes of our community and our citizens from all sides who adopt the ‘if it ain’t broken, break it’ approach to Falls Church.”

He added, “One thing is clear, based upon not only my opinion but objective national rankings, Falls Church is emphatically not broken...I will defend all our people and government from being unfairly characterized, or worse yet broken, by the kind of extreme political polarization that characterizes too much of the national debate.”

Current F.C. School Board chair Shannon Litton, in comments to the News-Press yesterday, said “I would suggest Mr. Shapiro spend a little more time volunteering and serving in our community and a little less time building his national profile. It’s important to get to know our students, staff and community if he wants to make meaningful choices on their behalf.”

She added, “The School Board has struggled through many difficult things this year, like many school boards across the country. Not everyone has agreed with our decisions, but I think anyone who knows the members of our school board knows we are sincere in trying to do what is best for our kids and our community.”

School Board member Phil Reitingger added in a Facebook post, “As you (Shapiro) want to join the School Board, focus some energy on education, which you barely mention, rather than politics, graphic design and fundraising. Complaining about polarization in a self-aggrandizing *Wall Street Journal* editorial seeking national attention is rich.”

Peg Willingham, chair of the Falls Church City Democratic Committee, said in an email, “I have been researching whether and how to endorse candidates in non-partisan races, particularly this year’s F.C. school board race. Across all of Virginia and doubtless other states, pro-Trumpers are using the ‘open the schools’ issue as a political weapon and that is happening here as well.”