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HOT

'My perspective really changed': Frederick County School Board Chairman reflects on 7 months in office

By MOLLY WILLIAMS The Winchester Star

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Edward Sturdivant

WINCHESTER — Frederick County School Board Chairman Edward “Scott” Sturdivant stepped into his role as an elected official on a mission to turn things upside down.

He expected to uncover “indoctrination” in the division’s classrooms, to cleanse school libraries of “sexually explicit, adult materials” and to take a hard stance on Standards of Learning (SOL) scores and disciplinary issues.

“I had a lot of preconceived notions,” Sturdivant said in an interview Monday. “... I planned to come in and kick all the sand out of the sandbox and just be a jerk. That was my plan.”

Instead, he says he’s found talented students, passionate staff and an enthusiastic administration with which he’s enjoyed working.

Seven months after being sworn in as a School Board member, Sturdivant says the experience has changed him.

He ran what was arguably one of the more impassioned campaigns leading up to last November’s election, his bravado strengthened by years of experience as a minister. He was angered by his own experiences with division leaders and wanted to see a change in the way things were done.

But when he started visiting schools, catching glimpses of what was happening in classrooms throughout Frederick County, he said his views on the school system began to shift.

“Once I got elected and I started to see the people, started to see what they do, started to talk to them, my perspective really changed,” Sturdivant said. “I saw how dedicated a lot of them were.”

He hasn’t come upon the indoctrination he anticipated, he said. Instead, he said he’s seen a true effort to educate students and people who are “really invested in teaching our kids and giving them the best education ...”

“I have not seen any indoctrination,” he said. “I’m not gonna say that somebody hasn’t. I’m not that naive. But when I go into schools and I see what’s going on firsthand, I do not see indoctrination. I don’t see things that shouldn’t be there, things that I’m overtly opposed to.”

Based on conversations with division Superintendent George Hummer, Sturdivant says he believes “he’s on that same wavelength.”

“He wants to educate the kids, not indoctrinate the kids,” he said. “So I don’t think that is an issue here.”

Sturdivant did initiate book challenges when he took office, protesting materials which he felt were inappropriate for kids. However, he found that “[M]ost of the books that I had the biggest issue with had either been stolen or lost.”

“So that part of it was fine,” he said, “and I kind of backed away from that.”

His perspective shift has also impacted the way he votes, the most recent example being his support for a potential fourth FCPS high school, a project which he says he was opposed to when he first came onto the board.

“People got mad at me for voting for the school, and I’ve been pilloried on Facebook for it, which I don’t care anymore,” he said. “... What changed my mind [was] getting into the schools, seeing that they are overcrowded. We have serious issues here.”

He referenced Bass-Hoover Elementary School, where he saw a special education teacher using a wheeled cart as an office, and the crowding he says he’s seen in the hallways at Millbrook High School.

“Let’s face facts, adding more trailers is not going to solve the problem,” he said. “... People are coming here. When I drive up [Interstate] 66 in the mornings and in the afternoons, I see the number of people that are starting here. It wasn’t like that 10 years ago. ... So if we don’t do something now, the problem is only going to get worse.”

Sturdivant said there’s “a very small minority” of people who are upset over his performance on the board, but that in general, he’s been largely supported by most people.

He also said that he “was very naive” when he entered office, and that he’s been surprised at where the bulk of the criticism toward him has arisen. He anticipated it would come from people who were “more left leaning.”

Instead, he says people who “used to support me” are now “spreading lies and rumors.”

“That was the thing that I think bugged me the most was blatant lies and misdirection, the things that are getting posted now,” he said. “ ... All I do is pray for them. They need Jesus. That’s all I can tell them. But you’re not going to make everybody happy.”

Sturdivant said that his overarching views on public education haven’t changed since taking office. Nationwide, he still sees failures in the system.

Kids don’t know cursive, he said. They can’t count change and they can’t read analog clocks. He sees “stupid things” that go on in public schools across the country.

But while he does want to see improvements in education locally — particularly with SOLs and discipline — he also says he doesn’t see those “stupid things” happening in Frederick County.

On the contrary, he said that much of what he sees throughout the division gives him hope. One teacher and student at Frederick County Middle School had a particularly profound impact on him.

Sturdivant said he was invited to see the eighth graders present their “passion projects” at the end of last school year. One student, who had special needs, detailed how far he had come during his three middle school years, as well as the goals he had for himself going forward. Making As and Bs was one. Improving his behavior was another.

Sturdivant said he spoke with the teacher about this student, “and she broke down in tears and told me, ‘You should have seen this kid when he was in sixth grade.’”

“This kid had made so many strides in his three years there, and I gotta give credit to the staff that helped him, that they even gave him an award for excellence at the end of the year when they were giving all the eighth graders awards,” he said.

It’s those experiences that Sturdivant says have opened his mind when it comes to the school system.

“Those are the kind of things that I can sit back and say, ‘This is what it’s all about,’ is people like this kid, who is my new hero,” he said. “That’s what we need to be fighting for.”

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