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HOT

'Reprehensible': Teachers, parents, students lash out at School Board over events at FCMS

By MOLLY WILLIAMS The Winchester Star
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WINCHESTER — Suzanne Miller approached the Frederick County School Board Tuesday evening carrying a stack of wooden plaques commemorating awards she's received throughout her nearly three-decade career as a Frederick County Middle School teacher.

FCMS Teacher of the Year, 2003. FCMS Teacher of the Year, 2006. FCMS Teacher of the Year, 2012.

"And finally, here's the big one," Miller said. "For one year in 2018, I represented all of Frederick County Public Schools as the Teacher of the Year."

Once upon a time, she said, these accolades brought her joy and a sense of great pride.

"Today, however, I hand it back to you," she told the board, "because I don't even recognize who Frederick County Public Schools is anymore, and I'm disappointed with who we've become."

It was wall-to-wall people at Tuesday's School Board meeting. Attendees filled the seats in the gallery, stood against the walls, sat on the floor and even spilled into the hallway outside the board room.

Many audience members wore black, seemingly at the request of the Frederick County Education Association which, in the weeks leading up to the meeting, issued a call to action via social media.

"PLEASE JOIN the coalition of FCEA, FCPS staff, students, and community members at the FCPS School Board meeting on November 19 at 7:00 p.m., wearing black in solidarity," one post reads.

"You are not required to speak before the board."

The rallying cry was the controversies that have played out at Frederick County Middle School over the past few weeks, which have rippled throughout the school division and the county as a whole.

Audience members questioned the abrupt departure of former FCMS principal Jerry Putt. They denounced the outrage some parents previously expressed over a since-ended FCMS flex time option titled LGBTQ+ Kindness, as well as some community members' discourse regarding LGBTQ+ people. They were angered at the idea of FCPS staff being put "on notice," as was insinuated by at least two School Board members at their meeting in October.

FCMS teacher Greg Abell said that the events of the past few weeks have "created a culture of fear within our building for both students and staff."

He later added that he found the idea of being put on notice "reprehensible."

"Maybe it is you that has been put on notice," he continued. "On notice for discrimination, and for underestimating the teachers of this county."

FCMS teacher Helen Charrier said that the rhetoric surrounding FCMS teachers and the LGBTQ+ community "has created an unsafe environment for many students and staff."

"No political or religious beliefs can justify discriminatory behavior," she said. "... We must prioritize respect, inclusivity and safety for everyone. And when I say everyone, I truly mean it."

Sam Gesford, a teacher at Robert E. Aylor Middle School, said that teachers are professionals who are not "in the business of indoctrination."

"But it's impossible to do this work well without being in the business of compassion," he continued. "Now, I urge you, members of the School Board, to consider fairness and kindness and justice in proposed policies, while considering how our discourse and rhetoric shapes the blossoming minds of those who will inherit this earth, and what kind of place we want to leave for them."

Speakers also emphasized statistics about LGBTQ+ students — that they are more likely to contemplate suicide, and that access to safe and supportive spaces can help mitigate those feelings.

"All we want," said FCPS teacher Danny Higgins, "is for LGBTQ kids to turn into LGBTQ adults."

Gainesboro District resident Christina Lawson recalled that when she was in middle school, her parents divorced, and her father came out as gay. As a 13-year-old, she said she had a lot of questions with no place to turn.

"I was told to be cautious around my father and his friends because they were pedophiles, because they would try to 'recruit me.' I was told all about hell and damnation. I was told to feel shame," Lawson said. "Here I am 47 years later still listening to the same hate, ignorance and intolerance I did in 1978. I don't think this is OK."

Lawson told LGBTQ+ students that they are not alone.

"There is no shame," she said, "and you have done nothing wrong."

Those from the FCMS community spoke about the loss they're feeling in Putt's absence, hailing him as an inclusive leader who made every child feel seen.

Holden Alexander, a current James Wood High School student who once attended FCMS under Putt's leadership, said, "Dr. Putt truly is one of the best principals I have ever had, and that's all I really have to say."

Another speaker said that Putt was "a principal among principals."

There was also solidarity from outside organizations. Mike Siraguse, a Frederick County resident who teaches at John Handley High School in Winchester and serves as president of the Winchester Education Association, said that he attended the meeting "to be a voice, to share and to let the Frederick County staff know that ... we stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters here in the county in the face of any of the issues that they might need our support in."

He ended by saying "to my Frederick County friends, you're always welcome in the city."

Katie Vance, executive director of the AIDS Response Effort (ARE) in Winchester, emphasized that there are affirming spaces for LGBTQ+ people in the area.

"While hate clearly exists in certain small pockets of this room, it does not exist in our center," she said. "People find community. They find love and support and care [in] the Winchester and Frederick County community. Please, come find us."

After about two hours, the public comment portion of Tuesday's meeting drew to a close, and the School Board took a five-minute recess before resuming the remainder of the agenda.

At the end of the meeting, School Board members Daryl Bell (Opequon) and Miles Adkins (Shawnee) briefly addressed some of the citizen comments.

Adkins emphasized that there are LGBTQ+ clubs throughout FCPS for students who wish to participate.

"Those are an after-school program," he said. "If your school doesn't have one, I encourage you to start one. ... If you wanted to have any kind of club after school, hey, that's awesome, that's your right, and it's legal by law."

Bell thanked the speakers, saying, "You gave us a lot to think about, a lot to take in and a lot to process, and I truly appreciate that."

He left attendees with a quote from Martin Luther King Jr., which he said "sums up how I feel about everything that you've said."

"Love is the greatest force in the universe," Bell read. "It is the heartbeat of the moral cosmos. We who love are participants in the being of God."

Outside the board room, FCMS staff expressed gratitude in seeing so many people turn out in a show of support.

"We know that that support is there, but seeing it in person and hearing what people had to say, and how personally it has affected people, I think, was important not only for us as the teachers at Frederick County Middle School to hear, but also for the School Board members to hear," said Anna Moffett-Thompson, who FCMS students know as Mrs. MT.

Moffett-Thompson and her colleague, Steffanie Jordan, said that their students have been "dramatically impacted" by Putt's departure.

"There's an underlying fear that this was their fault," Jordan said. "And it's heartbreaking when you have to look at an 11-year-old, who is looking at you with huge eyes, asking if they are the reason that this is happening."

During the public comments, FCMS parent Christie Jett said that her daughter had asked her if Putt was gone “because we’re all failing.”

“It’s not an anomaly question,” Moffett-Thompson said.

The teachers also said that students are missing flex time, which was removed from FCMS’s schedule entirely in the fallout of the LGBTQ+ Kindness controversy.

Beyond the different options available to students during this time, Moffett-Thompson said, it also provided an opportunity for kids to socialize with each other.

“They weren’t staring at a screen. They weren’t sitting still. They actually interacted with each other, and we got to see them being kids,” she said.

When asked what she hopes will come of the School Board hearing people speak out against recent events, Moffett-Thompson said she wants to see a change in how the board runs its meetings — a sentiment which Jordan shared.

She also said she wants the School Board to foster a more supportive and inclusive environment for teachers “because they have damage control to do at this point.”

“[T]rust is something that can be given freely, but once it’s gone, it’s really hard to gain back,” Moffett-Thompson said. “And by their actions and the lack of information and how they have dealt with this entire situation, they have lost the trust not only of myself, but of many people within the school community, and the students, the teachers, the parents.”

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