

Orange County School Board discusses school dress code, but makes no decision

By Dorothy Potter Snyder, Special to the News of Orange | Posted: Tuesday, May 9, 2017 9:48 am

Large police presence and Confederate flag displays at School Board meeting

Last night, after five months of vigorous public petitions to ban the Confederate flag in Orange County Schools, the County School Board indicated that it requires "more data" and discussion before taking any action to revise the school dress code to include such a ban.

There was a large public turnout at the meeting, which was held at the A.L. Stanback Middle School. Five anti-ban demonstrators waved large Confederate flags and sported flag apparel at the school entrance, offering a counter to much of the discussion that has gone on in favor of banning the flag.

The centerpiece of the meeting was Superintendent of Schools Dr. Todd Wirt's recommendation to the Board to discuss a proposed revision to Dress Code Policy #4316, which pertains to the appearance of "symbolic speech" on clothing. Dr. Wirt asked the Board to "identify additional information needed from staff." In 2016, the Board removed language from the dress code prohibiting symbolic speech, citing code redundancy.

Members of The Hate-Free Schools Coalition (HFSC), led by parent and activist Latarndra Strong, have given testimony at every board meeting since December 2016 to petition the Board to reverse the change, and put this item on their agenda for discussion. HFSC continues to urge the Board to explicitly ban display the Confederate flag in Orange County schools, including on clothing, backpacks, and computer screen-savers. Their goal is to set a clear policy to support teachers and administrators, and to help students and teachers feel safer in schools.

Ms. Strong first brought her concerns to the Board in September 2015.

Of the five "flaggers" protesting outside the meeting, three were from Orange County and two from Alamance County. Asked whether he would be offering any comments to the Board, ACT-BAC "flagger" Barry Brown said he would not, asserting that "whatever I say will be used against me." He continued, "They're threatening to erase history. My heritage shouldn't stop where your feelings start."

25-year-old "flagger" Kevin Scarborough said to condemn the confederate flag might have the opposite effect. "You ban it, more kids are going to wear it," Scarborough said.



Strong

Hate-Free Schools Coalition leader, Latarndra Strong outside of A.L. Stanback Middle School, where "flaggers" from ACT-BAC and Orange County manifested with a display of Confederate flags, t-shirts, and hats. "I don't know about you," said Ms. Strong to the Board, "But when I saw those flags outside the school, I felt a sinking feeling in my heart. Imagine what our children feel."

There were no disturbances as the public entered amidst a strongly enhanced law enforcement presence of Orange County Sheriff's Office deputies.

Before the meeting started, Board President Dr. Stephen Halkiotis strode out of the auditorium flanked by deputies, to tell the four men and one woman bearing Confederate flags outside the school that they could not bring the flags into the auditorium. Later, during the Board's discussion of the agenda item, Board Member Matt Roberts said that if the Board President had the power to ban the flag in the evening's meeting, surely he had the power to ban it every school. Noting the large police presence, Mr. Roberts said: "The fear we felt [of the flag demonstration] affected how the Board responded to this session...It's time we said the Confederate flag is not acceptable in our schools."

Many of the evening's public commenters read poetry, their own as well as that by well known poets like Billy Holiday, James Baldwin, and Nikki Giovanni. Not everyone was a poet however, and there was a mixture of hard talk and softer talk, many noting the need for healing, and all urging the Board to make a decision.

In her comments, Orange County resident Bonnie Hauser asked the Board to set policy, to be transparent about their meetings, to draft language to ban racially inflammatory symbols, and to create a timetable to resolve the matter prior to the start of the next school year.

Resident Stacey Sewall reminded the Board that, along with the five months of protest at Board meetings, HFSC has delivered a petition with 1,096 signatures demanding a ban of the flag in schools. Said Sewall, "The media has watched, and you do nothing. Every day the Board delays a decision, black and brown students are being harmed."

Of the 25 speakers, only one spoke to the Board against a proposed ban of the Confederate Flag. Said Jamey Warren, "There were no concentration camps in the South. I do not believe the flag should be blamed for recent crimes, including the murders in Charleston."

After the meeting, Latarndra Strong spoke to supporters. Said Strong, "We are hopeful that the Board of Education is finally responding to the needs of the students. This was a shift, but we are committed to continue the pressure until the environment at Orange County Schools are free of hate symbols, particularly the Confederate flag."

The Board determined to schedule a "work session" to discuss the matter further.