

COBB COUNTY; ; School board member criticized for 'China virus'

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Body

A Cobb County School Board member has come under fire for referring to coronavirus as "the China virus," which some parents say is racially insensitive.

David Banks, who represents parts of east Cobb on the school board, sent a campaign newsletter Tuesday to inform his subscribers that "since the China virus is still of concern," the school district had to cancel its annual ceremony honoring the school system's 2020 retirees.

Banks has not responded to requests for comment by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. The school board spent most of Thursday in a meeting.

Dr. Jonathan Chen, a Cobb resident who has children who attend district schools, said he wasn't shocked when he saw the language. Chen said he believes many people have become desensitized to the phrase because of President Donald Trump's regular use of it during news conferences and on Twitter.

The novel coronavirus responsible for the ongoing pandemic originated in Wuhan, China, in 2019, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Many different varieties of coronavirus exist.

Chen, who is Chinese-American, said referring to the coronavirus in that manner can lead to "resentment and distrust of Asians."

"It happens anytime anyone labels something in a way where it is trying to assign blame for a particular problem," he said.

Chen, a pulmonary and critical care doctor, said after receiving the newsletter, he reached out to Superintendent Chris Ragsdale and other school board members. Chen said he wants Banks to make a public apology and the school board to formally condemn Banks' language.

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The doctor said if a person uses a poor choice of words once, you can refer to those actions as "poor judgment."

"But if there's a pattern, then that's disturbing," he said.

This isn't the first time Banks has been accused of racially insensitive behavior. In 2017, he forwarded an email that falsely cited the Los Angeles Times for a series of false statistics, including that 95% of warrants for murder in Los Angeles are for "illegal aliens," and over two-thirds of all births in Los Angeles County are "to illegal alien Mexicans ... whose births were paid for by taxpayers."

The language in Banks' newsletter was indirectly addressed Thursday by two board members during a work session. Dr. Jaha Howard called on his colleagues to issue an official apology for anything said or done by a current board member that has been deemed "potentially racist."

"We should acknowledge our own behaviors within our own leadership," he said.

School Board Chairman Brad Wheeler told the AJC there is not much the board can do about Banks' comments, but he always reminds his colleagues "to be cognizant of your comments because they reflect on yourself and the entire board."

"It's in the hands of the voters," he said.

Banks faces a challenge from Democratic candidate Julia Hurtado in the Nov. 3 general election.

Cobb County Schools is the only large school system in metro Atlanta that has not formally addressed systemic racism in the wake of recent racial protests. The board has discussed on three separate occasions a proposed resolution denouncing racism, the latest on Thursday. But the school board, divided by party and race, again failed to pass the resolution.

Load-Date: August 22, 2020