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## SPLIT EMERGES OVER SCHOOL RETURN PLAN

No Hampton School Board member has voted 'nay' since 2016. Now two factions are divided

By Matt Jones  
Staff Writer

HAMPTON — The division among the School Board was clear even in how they sat.

Ann Cherry, Jason Samuels, Tina Banks-Gray and Richard Mason on one side. Chairman Joe Kilgore, Vice Chairman Reginald Woodhouse and Stephanie Afonja on the other.

"We can all have different responses to the reopening plan, it

doesn't mean we're not connected or disjointed," Afonja said, about 1½ hours into Tuesday's meeting at Sandy Bottom Nature Park.

"That's not what we're talking about, Stephanie," Banks-Gray said.

"Well then we need to be really clear what we're talking about, because I'm still trying to figure out why we're having a four-hour meeting," Afonja said.

"But see, but see, that's the problem," Cherry said. "Why is it that

you, as a board member, don't know why the heck you're here?"

Over the past month, a quiet but clear split has emerged on the board, which rarely disagrees in public. According to meeting minutes, it hasn't had a single recorded, non-unanimous vote since Dec. 7, 2016.

The group of four has pushed the board to talk more about the plans for reopening classrooms, saying that communication on the board is broken. Kilgore and his allies say the others want to step out of the board's lane.

**Turn to Split, Page 4**



Hampton School Board members Ann Cherry, left, Jason Samuels, center, and superintendent Dr. Jeffery Smith, right, listen to community members speak at a September meeting. JONATHON GRUENKE / STAFF FILE

### INSIDE A passion for Pocahontas

For the past three years, Rick Tatnall has worked tirelessly with Gloucester County to share information about Pocahontas' life and legacy. Tatnall said he's in it for life.

PAGE 3

### Biden mum on lockdown

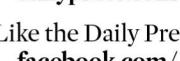
Joe Biden faces a decision unlike any other incoming president: whether to back a short-term national lockdown. But his advisers are signaling opposition to the measure.

NATION & WORLD

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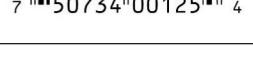


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## from the front

**Split**

from Page 1

"I know for a fact that this is not how a board should operate," Banks-Gray said. "This is not the board I have been in love with and so eager to be a part of."

On Aug. 5, the board voted unanimously to let Superintendent Jeffery Smith design and implement a phased return. At the outset of the meeting, Smith said that he anticipated staying all online for the first nine weeks unless conditions improved significantly.

Tuesday's meeting felt less like a board meeting and more like group therapy. The meeting was led by Gina Patterson, the executive director of the Virginia School Board Association, who joined via a video call.

"I asked for this meeting because I didn't feel like board members — four of us — were being listened to when (we) wanted to have this conversation before we got into November," Cherry said.

### 'All of the teachers can't be fabricating these situations'

Kilgore told board members on Oct. 18 that Smith planned to recommend some students return Nov. 4. After most board members voiced their support in an Oct. 21 meeting, they were flooded with a deluge of emails.

"Our board has never had any arguments regarding the plan," Banks-Gray said. "I think it was the actual date. Once we started getting inundated by all of the teacher correspondence, that's when we as a board were like, 'Hey, wait a minute. All of the teachers can't be fabricating these situations.'"

Board members don't respond individually to messages from staff or families.

They're supposed to forward concerns to the chair, who makes sure the superintendent or appropriate staff member gets them. The board is copied on the response.

But in this situation, some board members said they were alarmed by the emails, though they didn't doubt Smith.

"All they have is a simple question and we don't know," Cherry said. "How does it look when we can't answer a question about a



On Oct. 18, Hampton School Board member Joe Kilgore told the board the division superintendent planned to recommend some students return to class on Nov. 4. **AILEEN DEVLIN/STAFF FILE**

plan that we approved?"

Mason and Samuels requested a special called meeting for Oct. 27 to talk about it. Kilgore said he turned around the meeting in less than 24 hours and asked board members to let Smith know of questions in advance.

But Smith said he didn't know what to expect from the meeting. Did they want to change the date? Change the plan? He said he hadn't received some of the emails that board members referenced during the meeting.

"That has not been the protocol we have followed as a school division," Smith said. "It has not been the strength of this board or our working relationship as a matter of fact."

The split was noticeable in the meeting. Cherry, Samuels, Banks-Gray and Mason asked pointed questions. What about teachers who say their classroom isn't clean now? Is it true that there would only be 12 days of in-person instruction before winter break?

The other three were more

**"We've had more opportunity since June to discuss this plan than any other topic in the 10 years I've been on the board."**

— Joe Kilgore, Hampton School Board member

muted.

"We've had more opportunity since June to discuss this plan than any other topic in the 10 years I've been on the board," Kilgore said. "I hope that we can continue to have discussion about it, but I still believe that the authority as well as the decision-making appropriately belongs with somebody who is tasked to do that as a professional."

### One on one

October was not the first time the district had started to move toward reopening.

Kilgore told board members in late September that Smith wanted to start bringing back some

students on Oct. 19, the same day Newport News planned to bring back some students. Newport News's plan was scrapped after pushback from teachers and other community members.

Mason had COVID-19 himself and remains hesitant about bringing students back this fall. He pushed for weeks to have a board meeting to specifically talk about concerns but hadn't been sure how to make it happen.

Smith and his staff meet School Board members one-on-one or in groups of two on major topics before public meetings. Any larger groups would count as a meeting under the Virginia Freedom of Information Act.

In advance of the Oct. 6 meeting,

board members already had the opportunity to talk with Kilgore and Smith and reach a consensus that they wanted to wait until after the first nine weeks. Board members said they'd talked to Smith about the Nov. 4 date before the meeting where it was publicly presented. Some board members said Tuesday they didn't see why the special called meeting that Mason had sought was necessary.

"If I have a question, in my opinion, I'm going to talk to Dr. Smith before going into the meeting anyway," Woodhouse said.

But the four members on the other side of the room said one-on-one meetings wouldn't cut it in the face of teacher questions.

"We cannot get together outside of just two people talking unless it's in a meeting," Mason said. "As a board, I think we all need to be on the same page. We need to be able to read from the same sheet of music."

*Matt Jones, 757-247-4729,  
mjones@dailypress.com*