

# DISARRAY DOWNTOWN

## School board controversies divide district, community

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Editor in Chief

The Charleston County School District school board has sparked numerous controversies including secret board meetings over the superintendent, withholding public knowledge, and comments regarding race and sexuality as well as tumultuous public board meetings.

On Sept. 25, five school board members voted to place Superintendent Eric Gallien on paid administrative leave. This meeting, however, was held in secret, breaking Freedom of Information Act law, according to media attorney Jay Bender.

“Starting back, at least as early as the search to hire the superintendent who has now been suspended, it appears that there is a majority of the board that meets in secret to make decisions from matters such as the agenda, and when to call a meeting, and what action will be taken at that meeting,” Bender said.

Board members can hold meetings as long as all information is released and permitted for public knowledge, Bender said. Reasons for the meeting must be specifically provided, and the only information given was that a complaint was filed against Gallien for creating a hostile work environment.

On Oct. 27, the Board of Trustees reached a mutual agreement with Gallien after an investigation. The investigation cleared Gallien of any wrongdoing, but he chose to leave the job, according to a district press release. Anita Huggins has been appointed as acting superintendent.

“So what the school board majority has done, in addition to violating the law, is diminish the credibility that it and the school board as a whole and probably the school district, have in the community,” Bender said.

The five members who voted in favor for the suspension of Gallien are Charlotte Bailey, Edward Kelley, Keith Grybowski, Leah Whitley and Pamela McKinney, all of whom are backed by the right-wing Moms for Liberty organization. The Charleston County chapter of declined to comment on recent board events.

Just two days later, 15 high school principals, including Principal Chas Coker, came together to write and sign a letter expressing their disapproval with the recent events. The letter states, “Both in terms of substance and conduct the meeting did not meet basic standards of good governance that we expect from ourselves, our leaders, and our elected officials.”

“We would like to see the board work as a unit and handle differences of opinions, and handle them... more delicately than... they are handling them,” Coker said. “Since they’re an example for students... showing how you can work through differences and come to a common good.”

Coker said he signed the letter to show unity with the principals in the district.

On Oct. 1, in an interview with NBC News 2, State Representative Joe Bustos, the Republican chairman of the Charleston legislative delegation, wrote to Gov. Henry McMaster stating the recent controversies around the school board should be investigated by the state.

A day later, Rep. Wendell Gilliard called upon Attorney General Alan Wilson for an investigation involving the school

board’s actions.

“The Moms for Liberty are using their position on the school board to bully and intimidate the superintendent, and their attacks are clearly motivated by race. This is unacceptable, and we cannot allow it to continue,” Gilliard said in an interview with News 4.

On Oct. 5, Gallien filed suit against the district and board of trustees for breaching his contract, breaking FOIA law with the secret meeting, and ineffectively allowing him to do his job. In late October, six former members of the CCSD Health Advisory Committee who were removed by the same board members filed a lawsuit against the district.

In the school board meeting held Oct. 23, Lucy Beckham transgender senior Penn Doucher spoke out against their recent removal from the committee. Along with five other members, they were removed before their term was over. They were later told that state law requires one member to be a student body president, and for that reason, they were removed. However, their replacement is not a student body president and other application spots were left open.

“Since the board has made it quite clear that they do not owe us transparency or accountability, I am forced to assume [that I] was removed for my queerness. I am the trans kid you are so afraid of,” Doucher said.

Gallien turned down an interview with *Tribal Tribune* due to the recent lawsuit. Board members also did not respond to multiple requests for interviews with *Tribal Tribune*.

However the school board did release a statement regarding the recent lawsuit filed by Gallien:

“The lawsuit is being thoroughly reviewed, so we don’t have a comment at this time. However, we do want our community to know school and district staff will not be distracted from our commitment to providing life-changing educational opportunities for every student in our classrooms.”

On Oct. 9, secret voice recordings from board member Charlotte Bailey were released to the public. Bailey had met with Elvin Speights on Oct. 3, and because of South Carolina’s one-party consent, Speight did not need Bailey’s permission to record.

Bailey made statements about the gay and Black communities, stating that “there’s no such thing as gay children,” and that “those children are confused about who they are and what they are.” She also made comments on how she will not be used by the Black communities to influence her vote. Bailey is the representative of district 5 North Charleston, which is majority Black.

At the Oct. 23 board meeting, the board declined to remove Bailey from leadership positions.

Another board member, Kelley, was embroiled in a similar controversy in April when he was accused of telling attendees at a Moms for Liberty rally that he would show up to a teacher’s house with a gun if the teacher spoke to his child about transgender issues. Kelley denied the statement, but the board censured him in response to the alleged comments.

## Moms for Liberty influences school board decisions

At the heart of school board controversies across the nation lies the special interest group Moms for Liberty, an organization that has sought to place their chosen candidates on school boards to implement their beliefs and mission statements.

Moms for Liberty has pushed to remove

books from school libraries and the curriculum, claiming sexually explicit or divisive material, including calls for changes to the AP African American Studies curriculum.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, a non-profit organization that specializes in civil rights advocacy, has labeled Moms for Liberty an extremist anti-government group. According to the SPLC website on Moms for Liberty: “They also use their multiple social media platforms to target teachers and school officials, advocate for the abolition of the Department of Education, advance a conspiracy propaganda, and spread hateful imagery and rhetoric against the LGBTQ community... [it] has not only developed but leveraged its close political alliances and ties to extremist groups to broaden its reach and spread its

messages of anti-inclusion

and hate.”

Moms for Liberty’s strategy with local school boards is to flip enough seats to create a simple majority, and then the newly elected members remove current officials to further the organization’s agenda, such as the recent events within CCSD and the firing of Berkeley County’s superintendent last fall. The BCSD board fired Deon Jackson at the very first meeting following Moms for Liberty-backed candidates’ election.

Despite multiple requests for interviews, the Charleston County chapter of Moms for Liberty declined to speak with *Tribal Tribune*. However, Chapter Chair Tara Wood did provide a written

statement:

**Oct. 24**  
*Mayors from Charleston, North Charleston, and Mount Pleasant met to discuss recent events regarding the school board, and said they would bring in legislative delegation if needed.*

**Oct. 27**  
*A mutual agreement was met between the board and Gallien. He will not continue as superintendent and he was cleared of hostile work environment accusations.*

**Oct. 23**  
*A public school board meeting was held. Moms for Liberty Chapter Chair Tara Wood was shouted over while reading from book “All Boys Aren’t Blue” and Lucy Beckham senior, Penn Doucher, addressed being dismissed from the district’s Health Advisory Committee.*

**Oct. 2**  
*Wendell Gilliard called upon state attorney to investigate actions of the five board members.*

**Oct. 5**  
*Gallien sues the district for breaching his contract.*

**Oct. 9**  
*Secret recording of board member Charlotte Bailey making controversial comments about gay and Black communities released to the public.*

**Oct. 1**  
*State Rep. Joe Bustos, the Republican chairman of the Charleston legislative delegation wrote to Gov. McMaster to have state investigate on Board of Trustees.*

**Sept. 27**  
*Principals from across the district sent a letter to the school board expressing their disapproval of the board of trustees and their actions against the superintendent*

**Sept. 25**  
*Five school board members backed by Moms for Liberty held a meeting behind closed doors to put superintendent Gallien on administrative leave.*



By successfully creating ties with politicians, big media names, and other extreme groups like Proud Boys and QAnon, Moms for Liberty have been able to put themselves in position to enact their agenda. However, according to a YouGov poll, nearly 53 percent of adult Americans are unsure or don’t know about Moms for Liberty.

Multiple Wando faculty members declined interview requests with *Tribal Tribune* relating to Moms for Liberty.

“[Parents and teachers] disagree with book bans... the suppressing of Black and brown history and LGBTQ+ history. They disagree with suppressing LGBTQ+ acceptance in schools,” Henson Carey said. “Their goal is really to run for these school board seats, so that no matter what the majority of people believe they can enact their own policies.”

On the front lines contesting Moms for Liberty is the group Defense of Democracy. For CEO Karen Svoboda, it meant doing things the right way, and not playing dirty. In just one year, Svoboda’s Defense of Democracy has spread chapters all over the country.

“They... have done irreparable harm to the school system. And we are trying to stem the tide of... of regressions that our schools and our children and our families are facing,” Svoboda said.

Svobodas’s volunteers have set up signs around the Charleston area speaking out against book bans. These signs are paid for by her volunteers’ own money, and have since had recent damage to them by members of Moms for Liberty.

“[Our volunteers] have seen the Moms for Liberty group within the community... posting pictures bragging about them, throwing them in garbage bins,” Svoboda said. “We rise above these things. And for that reason, there is a lot of trust in Defense of Democracy... Our focus is 100 percent on the children and the families in the school districts and groups like Moms for Liberty, their focus is on control and power and so that is the difference between Defense of Democracy and Moms for Liberty.”

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