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FEATURED

School board meeting spurs protest, safety debate in Calvert

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Protestors congregate in front of the Brooks Administration Building early Monday morning to demand immediate action from the board of education to increase school safety after board member Kelly McConkey's motion to arm school safety advocates failed to get a second.

STAFF PHOTO BY ANDREW CEPHAS

Members of the board of education have been under public scrutiny after a motion to arm school safety advocates with firearms failed with no discussion at the Thursday board meeting. The scrutiny culminated in waves of social media commentary and a protest outside the Brooks Administration Building on Monday.

Following the conclusion of the business portion of the agenda at the March 22 meeting, Calvert school board members — with Pamela Cousins absent — were allotted an opportunity to give closing sentiments during the board comments segment.

Board member Kelly McConkey prefaced his comments by paying respects to everyone involved in last week's shooting at Great Mill High School in St. Mary's County that left two students, including the shooter, dead.

"I think in this day and age, right now the most important thing is focusing on school safety," McConkey said, referring to \$2 million the county commissioners promised the school system for school security funds. "These things are all going to take time to get in place. In my opinion, we don't have time. We need to act now. ... The one thing we can do right now is let our safety advocates be armed in our schools to protect our kids and our staff."

McConkey then made a motion to allow safety advocates to carry their firearm and be armed inside the county's schools. Without a second to the motion, it subsequently failed without any discussion.

The Keep Calvert Schools Safe Facebook page — run by McConkey's wife, Kimberly — shared a clip of the motion failing Thursday night. The video now has over 100,000 views with more than 1,500 shares. A majority of the video comments are in opposition of board president Tracy McGuire, vice president Dawn Balinski and member Bill Phalen not seconding McConkey's motion to arm safety advocates.

In follow-up interviews, each of the three board members began their comments by describing the difference in roles between the school safety advocates and the school resource officers, as the advocates are school system employees and the resource officers, or liaison officers, are members of the sheriff's office.

According to a release from the school system, the safety advocates' role is to help students make good choices and avoid activities that may result in harming themselves or others or criminal activity that might lead to arrest. Each high school has two full-time safety advocates while three safety advocates serve the

county's six middle schools. Each high school also has an armed liaison officer from the sheriff's office, while a supervising officer provides support where needed. These officers also serve the elementary and middle schools in their high school's feeder pattern.

"As part of the safety advocates' employment with Calvert County Public Schools, we don't know anything about their gun skills," McGuire said with concern, adding that most gun deaths are from accidents and suicides. "More guns in schools may not make students safer from gun deaths."

Noting that the motion was made during board comments, McGuire said the board's business was completed and when it wasn't seconded, that was the end of it.

"I understand why people think our silence means we don't care, but at that point in the meeting we're not debating the motion, so we don't really have a way to bring this discussion up. If you recall at the March 8 meeting, we had a really big discussion on school safety and if I had been asked to put arming safety advocates on the agenda for Thursday night's meeting, I would've done that and all of the same people who were in the room on March 8 would have been back in the room to help answer questions," McGuire said.

When asked if she would be in favor of adding school liaison officers to the elementary and middle schools, McGuire said she is open to the idea, but must think about if having guns in the elementary schools will be helpful for children.

Balinski composed a detailed letter, spelling out her concerns with McConkey's motion and why she did not second it. She sent this letter to many in the community to help reduce confusion. In a follow-up interview with The Calvert Recorder, Balinski said she is not opposed to having armed policemen in the schools, but wants to preserve the safety advocates' current role. She said she has been following proposed legislation that would increase school resource officers in school.

"It takes incredible and intensive training to be able to correctly react to an emergency situation when you're the one with the firearm. In order to preclude any types of accidental firearm discharges or shootings [they should] be the most highly trained people around and that is our law enforcement," Balinski said.

Balinski detailed her multipronged approach to preventing school violence, which includes physical prevention like providing active shooter training as well as providing mental health services to students. She said the school board also intends to match the county commissioners' \$2 million toward school security.

"Fighting guns with guns just has such inherent risks, and as a school system we have to look at the risk of all gun tragedies. When you just put more guns in the schools, there is potential for more threats," Balinski added.

Voicing his opposition to arming school safety advocates, Phalen said he is also opposed to adding liaison officers to the elementary and middle schools.

"I think we need to look at all the other options before we rush to arm our schools. You put a policeman in a school with kindergarten kids or first- or second-graders. What's going to go through their mind? What are they going to be thinking?" Phalen asked, adding that firearms have accidentally been discharged in U.S. schools.

Phalen, who has two grandchildren in CCPS, said he would not be opposed to having officers patrol the parking lots and exterior of the campus.

"I think we just need to look at the whole picture before we rush to judgment because once you put them in a school, you can't take them out," Phalen said.

President of the Calvert Education Association — the union representing the school system's educators — Dona Ostenso said the union wants all staff and students to feel safe.

"You do not stop a school shooter when he's 18 and already isolated. You intervene when he's eight [years old] and acting out and struggling. Reduce class sizes. Hire more counselors. Hire more school psychologists. Provide teachers with the resources they need to prevent kids from falling through the cracks," Ostenso wrote in an emailed statement.

In a phone interview, Sheriff Mike Evans (R) said he has been an advocate of arming school safety advocates for years and referred to it as immediate preventive measures the school system can take.

"I know you can't do it overnight, but with some additional training and some special ways to carry the gun concealed, you probably could do that. These people are already trained from being prior police officers," Evans said.

He said the school board should be open to having a discussion about arming safety advocates and exploring the idea as an option. He is also proposing to add two additional liaison officers.

After thousands of social media comments on McConkey's failed motion, a protest was held Monday morning outside of the Brooks Administration Building where around 100 concerned citizens joined elected officials in voicing the need for immediate action to increase school safety.

In attendance was vice president of the county commissioners Tom Hejl (R), along with commissioners Mike Hart (R) and Pat Nutter (R).

"The man made a motion. At least out of respect, you second it and you discuss it. He wasn't talking about gun control or having more mental health officials in the schools. He was talking about a topic that, just two days earlier, the tragedy at Great Mills [High School] happened. ... That, I think, is the most unacceptable piece," Hart said. He said active shooter drills should be as second-hand as fire drills. He added that some basic safety measures can be taken care of now like fixing doorless classrooms.



Hejl said the issue is personal to many in the county. His daughter, who teaches in the county, doesn't have any doors on her classroom.

"I spent 40 years in law enforcement ... and I saw a lot of tragedy in my life. I lost a lot of friends. I don't want to see that happen in our county. This is a wonderful county. It's a great place to live and rear your children," Hejl told protestors, encouraging them to keep voicing themselves to school officials.

While the deadline has passed to file for two at-large school board seats up for election in November, and Phalen and Cousins currently run unopposed, Hejl said there will be some write-in candidates and introduced retired law enforcement officer Mike Bomgardner to the crowd.

"He's prepared to be a write-in candidate, and with that said, he has my vote," Hejl said.

Bomgardner said he got involved in law enforcement because he wanted to make a difference in the Calvert community. As an officer working in the school system, he has assisted youth and worked with them to teach life lessons.

"I really did not think I would ever get involved in politics because I'm just not that kind of guy, but like my wife told me the other day, who's a school teacher, we tell our kids to stand up for what they believe in," he said. Bomgardner, who has children in the school system, said some simple fixes can be done in the schools. He indicated he has done security surveys and is passionate about the topic.

"There's a lot of things we can do to help and they need to be done now. One of the things we can do now is we can arm these safety advocates," he said. "If those officers have the ability to stop the threat like that school had down in St. Mary's County, then they're going to do that. Right now, you're paying [more than] \$40,000 a year to safety advocates to be good witnesses. That's it."

Northern High School senior Gavin Hill critiqued the school board for its response to McConkey's motion and expressed how students need the community to come together to find solutions to ensure student safety. Hill said he was bullied throughout elementary and middle school and credited his mother for keeping him strong. He encouraged all the other parents to support their children as well.

After receiving loud applause, McConkey — who is also vying for a county commissioner seat in the upcoming gubernatorial election — clarified to protestors that the rest of the school board knew his motion to arm safety advocates was coming during the meeting. "It was almost as if they wanted to shut me down on this," McConkey argued.

McConkey noted that 800 people have received tickets for the "Civilian Response to an Active Shooter Event" training class April 15 at Chesapeake Church in Huntingtown.

A petition to the school board requesting safety advocates be armed reached 2,372 signatures on change.org in just four days.

Cousins, who could not be reached for comment, hosted a school safety discussion Sunday in Dunkirk.

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