



How Much Do You Know About Your Local School Board?

By Educator Barnes – June 25, 2020

In a now [viral video](#), activist Gary Chambers, Jr. made it clear that the behavior of East Baton Rouge Parish School Board member Connie Bernard was unacceptable, and he demanded her resignation. He started his speech with these words. "I had intended to get up here and talk about how racist Robert E. Lee was, but I'm going to talk about you, Connie. Sitting over there shopping while we're talking about Robert E. Lee. This is a picture of you shopping while we're talking about racism and history in this country."

For years, community members have asked for the school named after Confederate General Robert E. Lee to be changed. In 2016, the board comprised and dropped "Robert E." and the school's name became Lee High School. That wasn't enough for some community members which is why the fight for change has continued. With Aunt Jemima being removed from food boxes along with other offensive images on other food items, as well as statues such as Christopher Columbus being removed, now more than any other time, was another opportunity to push for change. Instead of taking the concerns of constituents seriously, Connie spent her time shopping online.

When the words of Chambers got too much for her to bear, she exercised her white privilege and bolted for the door, which shows she still wasn't willing to listen. People who can't bother to pay attention and stay in the room while stakeholders are speaking at board meetings should not be on a school board. How many Connies are on school boards across the United States? Do you even know if there is a Connie on your school board?

The role of the school board is to hold the district and school leaders accountable for leading schools properly and to ensure all students are receiving a great education. If school board members don't listen to the community or are checked out, then citizens need to vote them out and even consider replacing them on the board.

Here are some tips on how to get more involved:

Know who is on the school board

People should know who is on their local school board. This information can be obtained by going to the district's website or calling the district office. Too many times, citizens enter the election booth not know anything about the school board members up for re-election.

Attend school board meetings

I will admit it is hard to attend school board meetings. The meetings happen in the evening which is the same time homework and dinner takes place. Most citizens who are interested in the school boards are parents with children enrolled in a school that the board serves. This may mean that you have to take your children to a school board meeting. A [Chalkbeat Indiana article shows me](#) in the front row at an IPS board meeting. I had to put one of my sons across my lap after his lego ended up flying across the room. It's not the best-case scenario, but it helps you stay informed.

Read board documents

Board documents are public information. If you cannot attend board meetings, go online, and read what happened. Some schools even share audio and video of the meetings online.

Speak at the school board meetings

If you are not happy with the decisions board members are making, speak on it. Speakers are timed. I suggest writing down what you want to say in advance. Also, consider practicing what you want to say.

Consider running for a school board seat

I am convinced, now more than ever, that we have too many board members concerned about their image and not the lives of the students. They don't hold school leaders accountable and don't have the courage to push for real change. You could be the change the school board needs.

Final thoughts

Remember, school board members' job is to serve you. Don't let any of them intimidate you. I have spoken to members of the Wayne Township, Washington Township, IPS, and IMSA school board during my career. Some encounters have been pleasant and some have not. For example, I was on a panel for an event hosted by the Children's Policy and Law Initiative of Indiana. I made some comments about the issues I saw in Washington Township elementary schools. I was polite that day. I didn't name the district, but former Washington Township school board member (current at that time) Don Kite knew exactly what I was talking about. After my panel, I stayed to listen to the panels that followed my panel. When the event was over, I found Mr. Kite at the end of the row blocking it as I was trying to exit. He seemed more concerned about what I said instead of what could be done about it.

Our children cannot afford to suffer due to the inaction of school board members. When we get done taking down statues, rebranding food, we need to clean up some of these school boards.