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Community Discusses Religious Liberties with BOE

Public Has Opportunity to Learn More Dec. 19 at 6:00 p.m.



More than 250 people attended the Bulloch County Board of Education's regularly scheduled meeting December 5, for an opportunity to speak about how they feel educators should be able to express their faith within a public school environment. Of those in attendance, 18 people shared their opinions publicly.

"Out of respect for our community's questions about the separation of church and state and to further explain how employees can express their faiths, the Board of Education has scheduled an information session for the public on Thursday, December 19, at 6:00 p.m., in the William James Educational Complex, the same site as tonight's meeting," said Superintendent of Schools Charles Wilson. At this session, the Board's legal counsel will provide a clear overview of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and how it affects school system employees while they carry out their official duties.

The Board will incorporate all questions from last night's meeting into the upcoming information session, as well as allow for additional questions. "It is our hope and intent to clarify the rights and expectations of our employees, so that we can all move forward to fulfill the mission of our school system," said Board Chairman Maurice Hill.

Though the Board and the superintendent have not adopted any new policies in relation to religious liberties, confusion arose after a November 6 meeting where Superintendent Wilson verbally reminded principals and central office administrators of how employees could and could not express their faith, something that has been done by former administrations as well whenever the school district receives complaints from national organizations.

Wilson shared with last night's attendees what had been discussed at that meeting: (1) Employees can stand near students during a student led prayer, but they may not stand within a student huddle or prayer circle, so as to give the impression of leading the prayer; (2) employees cannot have religious scripture on their Bulloch County Board of Education emails; (3) employees cannot have religious symbols in the school or classroom unless they meet constitutional requirements; and (4) legal counsel provided a guide from the American Defamation League concerning holiday displays. On December 2, Wilson also sent an email to employees that contained a summary of case law points as well as a document titled "A Teachers Guide to Religion in the Public Schools", to be used for assistance, if desired.

A recently formed advocacy group, the Bulloch County Citizens for Religious Liberties (BCCRL), asserts that all such requirements violate the civil rights of teachers. The group presented the Board with a petition signed by more than 1,500 residents and non-residents of Bulloch County.

It has become evident to the Board and Superintendent that further communication is needed to help clarify the rights and expectations of employees. "We, as Board members, have to correct what is erroneous in order to restore harmony and present a solution that is best for our administration and schools," Chairman Hill said in a statement after community participants had completed their statements. "We cannot remedy this overnight, and it must be conducted legally, properly, and ethically, but your (citizen's) concerns and questions are valued. I assure you, we are doing our best to resolve this matter."

Bulloch County Schools regularly receives complaints from national groups whose stated mission is to defend religious liberties, the most recent being from the Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. The AUSCS wrote multiple times on behalf of a local citizen, who had grievances with employees' participation in student-led prayer.

What began has a local discussion was taken to a national stage Tuesday, when BCCRL member Rob Kicklighter granted an interview with Fox News Radio Commentary Host Todd Starnes asserting that the perceived "crackdown" on religious liberties had resulted in the removal of a faculty Christmas card display at Brooklet Elementary School. Neither Kicklighter nor Starnes corroborated information with BES Principal Marlin Baker, Superintendent Wilson, or the school district's media contact. Starnes continues an active social media campaign against the district with accusations posted today based on additional interviews with Kicklighter and BCCRL founder Jonathan Cook. The two alleged how two of the school system's elementary schools have created a hostile environment to Christianity.

With Starnes' brand of inflammatory commentary and unsubstantiated claims of the school system "waging war on Christianity," BES and the district have received more than 1,000 calls and hundreds of emails from across the country from misinformed yet extremely hostile people. It also caused State Senator Judson Hill and U.S. Congressional Candidate Rick Allen to denounce the district. Allen, who was in attendance at last night's meeting, also signed the BCCRL petition.

"Our school system and community have become the battleground for issues beyond our control," said Wilson. Though individuals and groups outside the community are beginning to agitate the issue locally, the Board and Wilson expressed their desire to not let it derail the good work being done within the school system or end the open, honest conversation about religious liberties.

"What we have experienced is unfortunate and unnecessary and, while it has the potential to tear us apart, it is also an opportunity to bring us together and make us stronger," said Wilson.

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