

Debate over book, man in gorilla costume shake Penfield board

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A tense Penfield Board of Education meeting came to a sudden halt Tuesday night, sparking significant fallout.

Tensions rose as parents voiced their concerns and opinions on a book called "The Rainbow Parade." Then the meeting's commotion grew when a man dressed up in a gorilla suit with a MAGA hat on showed up.

The book in question at a Penfield school board meeting tells the story of how a young girl attends a pride parade with her two moms. Several parents spoke about the book and how they believe images in the book were inappropriate for children. Others supported its inclusion efforts.

Superintendent Tasha Potter and Emily Roberts, president of the Penfield board, said the behavior of the crowd left their student representative that was present visibly shaken. "They claim to protect students, I question that claim because they left one student, that we were able to put eyes on, visibly shaken," Roberts said.

Concerned about a children's book

Kate Feathers, who has two nephews that attend Penfield, said the controversy of the book is not because it is LGBTQ-friendly, it's the content of the book.

"What people do on their free time or what books they purchase is their choice, but on tax-paying dollars, the book is inappropriate," Feathers said. "No one is homophobically driven."

When the board got up to leave the meeting, people started to notice a person dressed up in a gorilla suit was in the room. According to Feathers, the gorilla costume is addressing a purported issue about what some children wear to school.

What was the gorilla suit about?

Jeff Briggs, CEO and founder of Rochester Wealth Management, grew up in Penfield. Briggs attended the school board meeting dressed up in the gorilla costume.

"I went there primarily because the grandparents of the child that I was there to hear about, I was the best man at their wedding," Briggs said. "I've known them since I was in the school where their grandson is right now. Their grandson has been suspended three times (for complaining about school policy)."

Briggs said he had the costume to show the school board how disruptive costumes can be in a group setting, referencing a rumor about attire at school.

He planned to put on the full costume after hearing the grandparents of the child he knew voice their concerns, but said he did not get that opportunity. "I saw that my friend's wife was upset because she did not get to say anything so

to console her I wanted to make her laugh," Briggs said. "I put the mask on and paws of the costume and gave her a hug, went back to my seat and took it all off."

Briggs said since this has happened he has been called a racist, a homophobe and a Nazi. He also mentioned receiving calls threatening his life and business. Briggs said there was no specific intent behind choosing a gorilla costume; he said he wanted something that would get people's attention and that would cover his face.

"I had no idea that the superintendent was Black, I went there to represent my friend's grandchild and be supportive and now it's gone viral," Briggs said.

Reaction to the board meeting in Penfield

The Penfield Democrats released a statement on Facebook on Wednesday in response to the events that took place at the board meeting:

Standing in unwavering solidarity with our Board of Education members and Superintendent who faced unacceptable racist and discriminatory behavior at last night's meeting. The deliberate choice to wear a gorilla costume to intimidate Black leaders is a reprehensible act of racism that has no place in our schools or community. This incident, coupled with the hostile response to LGBTQ+ inclusive literature, demonstrates exactly why we must continue working to create safe, accepting spaces where all students feel valued and represented. Our educators and board members deserve respect as they work to serve ALL students. If you believe in dignity, equality, and safe schools for every child, now is the time to speak up and show up.

Potter, the superintendent, who is Black, said the district does not allow children to come to school dressed in costumes. She questioned Briggs' choice of costume. "If you think about the symbol of someone being dressed as a gorilla and the historical context of that, of all the costumes that could have been chosen, why was that costume chosen?" Potter said in an interview.

"When you think about who's at the helm of this district, the superintendent of schools, as well as the people that are comprised on our Board of Education, why then would that be the choice for someone as a costume to come and say that they had concerns that we allow children to dress up?"

- Kerria Weaver works as the Government and You reporter for the Democrat and Chronicle, with a focus on how government actions affect communities and neighborhoods in Rochester and in Monroe County. She wants local journalism about government to be driven by regular people. What are you happy with or upset about local government? Is there an overlooked issue in your neighborhood? Get in touch at kweaver@gannett.com.