

WESTWOOD

Westwood school district meeting becomes shouting match as LGBTQ allies, critics face off

4-minute read



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WASHINGTON TOWNSHIP — Tensions in the [Westwood Regional School District](#) came to a boil Thursday, at a chaotic board meeting where LGBTQ+ students and opposing activists traded catcalls and accusations and local police were called in to keep the peace.

Hundreds of people packed the high school auditorium during the meeting, which came after the K-12 district's interim superintendent [abruptly resigned](#) amid a controversy over an [LGBTQ pride sign](#) that was removed from the middle school lawn.

Over the course of the nearly [four-hour meeting](#), a scuffle broke out in the high school lobby and a group of American-flag-waving protesters confronted a larger group in the audience who wore red in support of the LGBTQ community. The nine-member board drew jeers as it voted to end public comment with many speakers yet to be heard.



Hundreds pack the auditorium at the Westwood Regional High School in Washington Township with red shirts and pride flags to support Westwood teachers and the LGBTQ community. [Stephanie Noda/NorthJersey.com](#)

In the end, the board didn't take up the subject that had motivated much of the drama: a new flag policy adopted in May that prompted school administrators to remove a pride sign from Westwood Regional Middle School.

Board disinvented from graduation

The policy, along with other [perceived slights](#) to the local gay community, prompted about 50 high school seniors to deliver a letter Thursday asking the board not to speak at next week's graduation.

"We are a group of people who are trying to create better children, children who don't bully someone for being gay, children who feel like they deserve to live even if they are gay," Taylor Moses, a high school senior, told the board. "We are not just stupid teenagers, we are kids who know what it's like grow up in a town that they don't think supports them and are trying to change that."

But Westwood resident Toby Anderson, who brought an American flag to the podium, said the district should be spending more time focusing on test scores. He told LGBTQ supporters in the crowd, "disagreeing with you guys" was "not hateful" before warning the board not to let the "sheeple of the left dominate the conversation."

The district, which serves Westwood and Washington Township, also came under fire over a plan to [phase out honors courses](#) in the eighth grade and shift that curriculum into other classes. Board members said that plan will be discussed further.

'I only hear hate'

The meeting started quietly enough, with speakers rising to praise local students and teachers' accomplishments. But it soon turned rowdy. A group in a row near the front of the auditorium, some who carried American flags, seemed to be at odds with much of the rest of the crowd. Yelling ensued between the two sides at the first public comment session of the night, during which two board members stepped off the stage and the meeting was put on hold for a few minutes.

'I only hear hate coming from one side and it's not this side,' yelled one of the American-flag-wavers. As the board shut down public comment, a woman hoisting a pride sign called the school board "awful humans" who should "resign from their positions."

When the meeting resumed for the second public comment session, Washington Township police had been called in to supervise the rising tension. At one point, when a speaker was addressing the honors curriculum decision, board President Michael Pontillo interrupted her to tell an officer there was a "scuffle" happening in the hallway outside. Pontillo urged the crowd to keep the back doors closed, remain in their seats and let police handle things.

More: [Can this new LGBTQ pride sign end dispute in Westwood? It's up to the school board](#)

Paramus news: [New Paramus police chief ready to build leaders, protect community](#)

'Leave the children alone'

A few moments later, a woman from the group with the American flags [walked over](#) to take a picture of a student speaking in support of the LGBTQ community. The student yelled at her to stay away. Other parents surrounding the student could be heard saying "they are in her face taking pictures" and "why are they taking pictures of kids?"

Pontillo interrupted and asked if the group of American-flag wavers to the other side of the auditorium and "leave the students alone."

Around 10 p.m., while members of the community were still lined up to comment, the board took a vote to extend a second comment public period, but the motion failed.

Laura Cooper, Douglas Cusato, James Parrino, Kristen Pedersen and Stacey Price all voted against extending the public comment period. Irene Fenarjian, Jay Garcia, Andrea Peck and Pontillo voted to allow speakers to continue.

After the vote, Pontillo told the board "I really think we should listen to the public here, guys" but was met with silence, save for a comment from Garcia asking if the members could discuss why other board members didn't want to continue public comment.

Some community members yelled "cowards!" and "vote them out!" from their seats as the board continued on with the meeting.

On Monday, the district sent a letter to parents from Superintendent Jill Mortimer, who had been away on medical leave, announcing interim Kenneth Rota's departure and citing personal reasons. Mortimer officially returned as superintendent the same day but was not present at Thursday's meeting.

There was no decision on a [second pride lawn sign](#) that some residents have proposed to replace the original at the middle school. Mackenzie Fox, a high school senior, pressed the board for answers at the end of the meeting but was told the superintendent is the one to make the ultimate decision on the sign. With Rota gone and Mortimer not available, it was unclear where the matter stood.

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