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South Hadley struggles with bullying case

School Committee chair gives up seat

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Thursday, April 15, 2010

SOUTH HADLEY - Nine days after being re-elected, the South Hadley School Committee chairman, ensnared in criticism over bullying allegations surrounding a high school student's suicide, announced during a public meeting Wednesday night that he would relinquish the chairman's seat.

Edward J. Boisselle, who has served on the board for 10 years, including the past year as chairman, was quick to distance his move from the ongoing controversy over the death of 15-year-old Phoebe Prince. Prosecutors, who have brought criminal charges against six students in the case, have said some high school staff knew Prince was being harassed by classmates but took no action to stop the bullying.

Instead, Boisselle said he made the move because he has "always felt that the chairmanship should rotate every year." He plans to remain on the committee, and vice chairwoman JoAnn Jordan will become chairwoman.

A deeply divided, standing-room-only crowd of residents addressed school officials, expressing both anger and support toward administrators during a meeting that saw multiple outbursts.

The first two speakers were removed by police at Boisselle's request because they "talked about things that should not be talked about in public."

"The School Committee is coming off looking deplorable," said high school parent Barrie E. Chambers-Leonard. "I wish everyone had the chance to say what they felt today."

Boisselle later said he was sorry for having to remove the two speakers.

"I apologize for the aggressive manner I dealt with people who did not want to follow the rules," he said.

However, there was also strong support for school officials, and several speakers urged residents to withhold judgment until more facts are known.

"No school official who witnessed hurtful actions against a student would have failed to report such an incident, and there is no merit to the idea of an attempt to suppress information," said parent Janna Darrow-Rioux.

Matthew McDonough, also a parent, addressed those who have petitioned for the removal of Superintendent Gus Sayer and high school Principal Daniel T. Smith.

"(Their resignations) will not bring back Ms. Prince. It will not undo the indictments of our students," he said.

Several parents who said their children had been bullied in the South Hadley school system said administrators in those instances acted quickly and appropriately.

But those examples gave little solace to those who believed Prince's bullying was not properly addressed.

"I think it's time, Ed (Boisselle), that you stop focusing on discrediting the critics and address this issue," said Darby O'Brien, a resident who has been critical of the school's handling of the case. "You need to hold the officials, who could have stepped in at any point along the way, accountable."

"I'm sorry to see the town divided like this," Sayer said.

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"Critical to the success of (anti-bullying) programs, we must find a way to change the environment of our schools so that students, along with adults, accept responsibility for protecting one another from harm," Sayer said later, reading from a three-page press release that was then distributed to the audience.

School Committee members said they have yet to meet with Northwestern District Attorney Elizabeth Scheibel as they had planned, to further discuss the details prosecutors uncovered in their investigation. But, said Boiselle, they hope to do so in the near future.

"I take responsibility that we have not gotten together earlier, after the actions of the Northwestern district attorney's office," said Boisselle.

Should details of the district attorney's investigation reveal school staff were aware of the bullying and did not take action, Boisselle said, "there will be severe consequences."

More than 100 people were packed into the same library where prosecutors say Prince was harassed by classmates hours before she hanged herself on Jan. 14.

Earlier Wednesday, dozens of students carrying signs that read "No H-8" rallied outside the school, calling for peace in the rural western Massachusetts community, according to published reports.

In relation to both cyber- and in-person bullying, six South Hadley high schoolers# are facing criminal charges brought by Scheibel's office about 2½ weeks ago.

In the week before she took her life, Prince, a new student who moved to South Hadley from Ireland last summer, endured a string of bullying incidents at the hands of classmates that ranged from vicious name-calling to taunting and threats of physical violence, according to court documents filed last week.

The six charged as adults, who have pleaded innocent, are Kayla Narey and Sean Mulveyhill, both 17, of South Hadley, Austin Renaud, 18, of Springfield, and three 16-year-old South Hadley residents, Sharon Chanon Velazquez, Flannery Mullins and Ashley Longe, who are also charged as juvenile offenders.

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Comments

Thu, 04/15/2010 - 20:53 — pretzelogic

SH chair move illegal

What chairman Boiselle did was also illegal.

By opening the meeting for public comment, the chair created a limited public forum. As a designated public forum, he can only impose time, place and manner restrictions. He may not prohibit speech based on its content.

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Thu, 04/15/2010 - 16:11 — Theresa1

Speakers removed from meeting

After having 2 people thrown out of the meeting, Boisselle later said he was sorry for having to remove the two speakers.

"I apologize for the aggressive manner I dealt with people who did not want to follow the rules," he said.

I wish that the leadership of the South Hadly H.S. would have taken this approach with the bullies.

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