

SCHOOL BOARD RACES QUIETER

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

Rancor, anger was losing tactic, observers say

BY CRAIG SCHNEIDER

craig.schneider@newsday.com

The political divisiveness that defined Long Island school board races in recent years has lessened considerably this year, with many board candidates emphasizing school safety and budgets over volatile topics such as the teaching about race and gender, candidates and political observers said.

With elections set for Tuesday, some observers attributed the relatively mild climate to the post-pandemic absence of controversies such as mask mandates and school closings. Those issues divided Long Islanders and drove many parents to vent their frustration at school board meetings.

But some observers said they see something else at work: a concerted strategy on the part of some to tone down the culture war issues, at least during these board elections. They note that candidates who emphasized those issues last year saw heavy losses.

"I think they realized that the angry rhetoric did not serve them well," said Michael Dawidziak, a political consultant for more than 40 years based in Bayport. The criticism often looked like candidates were railing against their children's schools and teachers, which parents supported, he said.

"They came to understand that what they were trying to sell wasn't selling," Dawidziak added.

Long Island is home to 124 public school districts, each with its own school board races.

Amanda Cohen-Stein, president of the Long Island Strong Schools Alliance, said controversies regarding the teaching of gender identity and the nation's racial history continue to pop up at school board meetings, but "things have been — or seem — a little bit quieter."

"Anger wasn't getting them



There are a total of 61 contested school board races this year, compared with 81 such races last year.

anywhere," added Cohen-Stein, whose nonprofit group focuses on enhancing critical thinking skills, diversity, equity and inclusion in schools. She said there's still some concern about extremist groups interfering with local schools.

Voices of divisive groups

Cohen-Stein pointed to a lawsuit filed against the Comsewogue district in January, in which the parents of a student accused a teacher of encouraging their child, who they said identified as female, to use a male name without their knowledge. The issue led to a sometimes-raucous board meeting in March attended by representatives of the Proud Boys, Moms for Liberty and Long Island Loud Majority, along with leaders from the LGBT Network.

The Proud Boys have been declared a hate group by the Alabama-based Southern Poverty Law Center. The Long Island Loud Majority has been defined as an "extreme antigovernment group" by the law center. The center has said it is also concerned about Moms for

Liberty groups.

Some of these groups disagree with those descriptions, and Island leaders of two of them dismissed the notion of a shared strategy to downplay culture war issues. They said candidates are simply focusing on issues dear to voters.

"It is calmer — in a good way. There's less energy," said Barbara Abboud, chairwoman of the Nassau chapter of Moms for Liberty. "While we might not agree on everything, we do agree that children are most important in education."

This year, Abboud said she didn't have the time to vet candidates since she's running for a school board seat herself in Farmingdale. Her group has not made any endorsements, she said.

School board elections are nonpartisan, but candidates often publicly campaign in groups with shared views. Abboud is running with Matt Wilson and Parsa Karimi, while a separate group of candidates is incumbents Sheree Jones and Ralph Morales, along with Dawn Luisi.

Jones said that while her op-

ponents might be less aggressive than in previous years, they continue to oppose the ways in which race, gender and history are taught.

'Want to sanitize history'

"It seems as though they want to sanitize history. They don't want to deal with racism," Jones said.

Last year, the two Moms for Liberty groups on Long Island focused on increasing parental rights and opposing the way in which they perceived race, gender and history being taught. The group endorsed 30 candidates for local school boards but won only eight of the seats, according to a Newsday analysis of election results.

The Suffolk chapter of Moms for Liberty did not respond to requests for comment for this story.

The Long Island Loud Majority highlighted 13 districts in social media posts last year, and its candidates lost in nine, won in three, and in one district — Lindenhurst — split its result, with one winning candidate and one losing candidate. This year, the group will endorse in

a handful of districts, Loud Majority leader Kevin Smith said.

Bob Vecchio, executive director of the Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association, said he sees less tension in this year's races. But he attributed that to a kind of collective exhale following the COVID-19 crisis, as well as a generally positive financial picture in many districts.

Vecchio noted that there are fewer contested board races this year. A total of 61 races are contested, versus 81 last year, according to a Newsday analysis.

"I think some passionate issues have worked their way through communities," Vecchio said.

It's unclear whether school board elections are milder across the country this year, said Samuel Wonocott, a staff writer for Ballotpedia, a nonpartisan group that follows elections. He said he sees races in some states touching on "conflict topics" such as the teaching about race and gender, but others are not.

Smithtown, among the Island's largest school districts with more than 8,000 students, is an example of a place where political rhetoric flared in recent elections, only to diminish this year. In 2021, challengers Stacy Murphy, John Savoretti and Karen Wontrobski-Ricciardi defeated three incumbents, running on a platform that questioned the district's equity efforts and accused the district of teaching critical race theory.

Long Island school leaders repeatedly have said they do not teach the theory.

Savoretti, who is running for reelection, said residents still care about issues such as inappropriate books and what some see as a liberal bias in education. Yet his candidate statement on Facebook makes scant mention of those issues. The statement emphasizes his desire to make Smithtown schools safer and elevate academics.

His opponent, Nicholas De Bello, said he's noticed that the political anger "doesn't seem to be as ramped up" this year.

"People don't want our community to be a hotbed of politics," said De Bello, adding that he doesn't see a role for politics in children's education.