A district divided

Political division has pushed three board members to resign

Tom Martin

Galesburg Register-Mail

USA TODAY NETWORK

ONEIDA - First it was school masks, then a transgender policy and finally a decision to remove a book from the classroom.

The ROWVA School Board, who for years voted 7-0 on major issues, started splitting votes in August 2021 over mask requirements. Since then the board has been divided on at least seven votes on a variety of issues.
When the dust settled March 10 - if it has, in fact, settled - three of the seven board members had resigned, as well as two long-time teachers and the school superintendent.

The three resigning board members left due to the contentiousness and direction of the board, as did the two teachers. Superintendent Joe Somberger made no mention of the board division in his resignation letter.

The board had served together since 2017.

The ROWVA School district has about 600 students- and represents several small towns, Rio, Oneida, Wataga, Victoria and Altona, all with populations under 1,000 people. According to the Illinois Report Card, about 37% of its students are considered low income, compared to Galesburg's 68% students who are low income.

The three ROWVA board members on the minority side of some of these issues were the ones who resigned. James Haynes, among the longest serving, ran for his seat as recently at spring 2021, only to resign at the March 10 meeting - less than a year later - along with Melissa Shepherd. Haynes joined the board in 2009 and was serving as president. Shepherd had been on the board since 2015

Board member Rob Kalb, the longest serving board member, since 2007, resigned Feb. 8.

**Everyone's talking, but no one's answering questions**

What caused the conflict? The Register-Mail's efforts to interview board members and teachers has proven un-successful. All four current board members - Scott Lake, John Kuelper, Ryan West and Matthew Johnson - would not answer questions, and the three resigned board members wouldn't talk beyond their resignation letters.
New board member Amber Shepherd, added Monday, wasn't interviewed for this story. The four teachers who were asked for comment - including teachers union representatives Rebecca Brown and Beth Holt - also wouldn't go on record.

In all, 12 potential sources, including four public servants, refused to answer questions about what happened over the past eight months in the ROWVA School District.

The Register-Mail tells this story through meeting minutes, published news stories, resignation letters and interviews with community members and a student. The newspaper continues its efforts to seek information.

'We have division within our board'

All three resigning board members referred to a division on the board, but Shepherd was the most outspoken about it.

"Over the past nine months, many decisions have been made by this board that greatly upset our students, staff and community members," Shepherd wrote in her resignation letter March 10. "It seems we've come to a place where this board (at least four members) feel they need to stand ground with some community members to the detriment of our staff and administration. With a divided board, we have not been able to smooth these relationships."
At the March 10 meeting, board president Haynes also brought up the board division.

"At this point, we have division with- in our board and clouded perspectives," Haynes wrote in his resignation letter. "We need united members with a consistent/common approach to our future success.

"Over the past several months we have been challenged with several unforeseen distractions to the process of education," wrote Haynes. "While we have overcome most, we have left damage along the way."

Even Kalb, who resigned for personal reasons, mentioned the divide in his resignation letter.

"I especially hope that the divides that have been caused lately can be bridged and movement forward in a progressive manner that accounts for all students' needs can be found," he wrote.

Kalb would not answer questions other than to say his reasons for resigning were not all personal.

"I don't know that I wish to say much," Kalb responded in a text. "However, I do want to let you know that if the board were operating as it had for first 14 years of my tenure, I would not have needed to resign my position in spite of my family needs."

Current board members Scott Lake, John Kuelper, Ryan West and Matthew Johnson were asked for interviews about this division and they all declined.

**Removing book apparent tipping point for board**

After disagreeing on masks and questioning the school's implementation of its transgender policy, the board clashed on the teaching of "The Hate U Give," a novel inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, according to its author Angie Thomas' website. The story is about a 16-year-old who witnesses her friend shot and killed by police.

The book spent 38 weeks at the top of the New York Times' best-seller list in 2017 and was made into a feature film and earned numerous literary awards. It also was banned by a Texas school district temporarily and then returned to its libraries with a parental consent requirement. But it's not just Texas. The American Library Association listed "The Hate U Give" as one of the 10 most-challenged books of 2017, 2018, and 2020 due to profanity, and it was thought to promote an anti-police message.

The conflict in ROWVA came to a head at the Jan.10 school board meeting after parents had complained to the board.

Superintendent Joe Somberger recommended not to remove the book. "When you deny the author the right of free expression you in turn deny everyone else the right to see a different perspective," Somberger told the board in January.

Several parents, teachers and students spoke to the board about the book.

Those against the book said it contained too many expletives. Speakers also charged that there was a lack of transparency between the curriculum and the ROWVA community and that the book violated written board policy.

Board members would not confirm in an interview whether a policy was violated.
After the superintendent's recommendation to keep the book, board member West motioned to remove the book from the classroom, but to allow it to exist in the library. No one seconded that motion. However, the board then voted 4-2 to follow that directive "to postpone ... action on the book until the board has approved the core values of the ROWVA school district and a curriculum:"

**Who discussed 'The Hate U Give' when?**

What that vote meant was that the board's previous decision to remove the book from the curriculum would stand, at least until the curriculum committee had a chance to review it. But when did the board or administration originally decide to pull the book?

The Nov. 15, 2021, board minutes show no votes regarding "The Hate U Give:"

When Somberger was asked if a decision regarding the book was made at the Nov. 15 meeting, he said: "There was no decision in the Nov. 15 board minutes."

That's not the same as saying it wasn't decided.

Somberger did say the book was discussed in the public comments portion of the meeting.

In her resignation letter submitted in January, teacher Traci Johnson accuses the board of discussing the book in closed session, which would be a violation of the Illinois Open Meetings Act.

Johnson and teacher Rebecca Weitekamp had added the book to the curriculum in the fall. Neither would answer questions about what happened, but Johnson's letter of resignation says the book was discussed behind closed doors in November.

"I do not regret standing up against the board making a curriculum decision in closed session and then twisting it around to make it seem like the book had not been banned from the curriculum; use whatever term from the thesaurus you choose, the book was removed from the curriculum without even an investigation," Johnson said in her resignation letter.

Did the board discuss removing the book in closed session?

Somberger doesn't know. He was in the closed session to discuss personnel items and then he left while the board remained in closed session.

Remaining in the closed session were all seven board members. None will answer any questions, let alone whether they discussed "The Hate U Give."

Yet, the book was suspended from classrooms. Johnson would not say how she was informed not to use "The Hate U Give."

**Some concerned about board's direction**

With the three dissenting board members now off the board, the majority will name their replacements. At Monday's board meeting Amber Fleming was added to replace Kalb. Fleming was one of six people who put their names forward. The remaining five have put forth their names for the seats left open by Haynes and Shepherd.
Six people vying for a board position contrasts with the 2021 election where only two candidates filed petitions to run for three seats on the ROWVA School Board. Lake was re-elected as a write-in to fill the third slot.

Mary Stiers of Oneida knows the district. She taught in ROVA/ROWVA for 26 years and her children graduated from ROWVA High School.

She doesn't like what she's seen lately.

"When Jim Haynes and Melissa Shepherd resigned in March, and Rob Kalb earlier in February, I was very upset," Stiers told The Register-Mail.

"Recently I have seen the board consistently split 4-3 on controversial issues. The three who resigned most closely represented the way I felt about the issues. With these board members gone, I worry about the direction the board will be taking in the future."

She hopes the new board will include diversity of thought.

"The district has to heal. To do so, board members must carefully choose three new people to fill the vacancies left by Kalb, Haynes, and Shepherd. To maintain a balance of positions on future issues, I hope they avoid hiring 'yes men/women."

(Stiers and others in this story were interviewed prior to the board appointing Fleming.)

Another former teacher, Margaret Swanson, said she hopes the board will choose members who are broad-minded and are capable of listening to the teachers.

Swanson of Altona, population 463, taught in the school district from 1973 to 1989 before taking a job in Knoxville schools. Her children graduated from ROWVA.
Former teacher: Community bears some fault

She does not believe the board is on the right track and thinks some members of the community are partly to blame.

"I believe that they (the board members) have listened to too many people with extreme opinions," Swanson told The Register Mail. "Perhaps some of the fault lies with people in this community who have allowed more radical opinions to prevail."

Andrew Bowman, a 2004 graduate of ROWVA who has children attending, sees it a little differently. He's a fifth generation farmer living outside of Oneida.

"ROWVAs situation is really a microcosm of all society - folks with the strongest opinions seem to be most heard,' Bowman told The Register-Mail. He said that's not all bad because in a small district people's opinions at least are heard. The problems, however, were exacerbated.

"Unfortunately, the conflicts that had occurred perhaps could have been handled - on both sides - differently, but none of them had to be 'zero-sum' in nature," Bowman said. Many of them, I believe,
began as small disagreements that escalated unfortunately - 'mole-hills became mountains.' There is blame all around for that."

Swanson says these school board disputes are not unique to ROWVA.

"What has happened at ROWVA and other school districts seems to reflect what has happened in our country the past six years," Swanson said. "People have stopped listening to opposing opinions and trying to understand both sides of an issue."

She said the Altona Book Club read "The Hate U Give" recently discussed it. "It was so enlightening to be able to amicably share opinions on several controversial topics treated in the book. While we may not have all agreed on some issues we listened and gained insight into what others thought. "Maybe that is what Mrs. Johnson hoped for her students to have had the opportunity to experience," Swanson said.

“Trying to teach empathy and understanding”

Lizzie Wicks, a junior at ROWVA, says removing the book was a missed opportunity to add to students' understanding.

Wicks, who is an officer on the student council and involved in many activities, said she was not in one of the classes with "The Hate U Give," and has not read the book, but she thinks pulling it from the classroom was "ridiculous."

With a white parent and a Filipino parent who is an immigrant, Wicks said she's experienced racism.

"There were always comments. I've heard a lot of 'go back to your country.'"

"I can't imagine what it's like for the few Black students in our school," Wicks said.

Janine Glass, whose son graduated from ROWVA in 2019, points out ROWVA School District is mostly white. The district is 92% white, according to the Illinois State Board of Education's 2020-21 report card. Black students make up 0.3% of the student body.

"They are trying to teach the kids what the Black experience is," Glass told The Register-Mail. "They're trying to teach empathy and understanding."

Loss of teachers Traci and Chris Johnson

"My son was extremely good at English," recalls Janine Glass. Justin Glass is now at Western Illinois University studying to become a teacher. Traci Johnson was an inspiration to the 2019 graduate.

"Mrs. Johnson was one of his favorite teachers. She's an awesome teacher. She came to my son's graduation party," Glass said.

Wicks agreed.

"She was one of the best teachers ROWVA ever had," Wicks said. "Every single student seemed to like her."

But Johnson resigned after the flare up over "The Hate U Give."
In her resignation letter, Johnson said her problems with the board started when she wrote an email in favor of following the governor's mandate to wear masks that some of the board members didn't like. She said it has been an uphill battle at ROWVA since then, including sitting in a school board meeting when she said she was verbally attacked.

"I thought I would retire here 20-plus years from now having put ROWVA on the map," Johnson wrote. "In my mind, I have been the ideal type of teacher that you want to stay in your district long term, and, in return, this was my dream job until this year."

'This was my dream job until this year'

A high school English teacher, she'd been in the district for 13 years.

"I have spent countless nights lying awake wondering how it is that in such a short time, a few members of the board of education have been able to rip away my dream job in my dream district.

"I wish the district well. I see several avenues where the district can move forward and be the best in area and one of the best rural districts in the state of Illinois," she said.

Her husband, Chris Johnson, also resigned. He teaches social studies at the junior high and high school, an educator in the district for 20 years. His resignation letter touched some of the same points.

"Going into this year, I saw myself retiring from this district when the time came many more years down the road. ... As this year has gone on, I no longer see that future," Chris Johnson wrote.

He said the insincere and insulting statements made by some members of the board have done irreparable harm.

Stiers, whose children graduated from ROWVA, says the Johnsons leaving is a big loss.

"Traci is working on her doctorate degree, is published, and has also been a national presenter in education," Stiers said. "She teaches dual credit English composition as well as other courses. Chris has a master's degree and is a value social studies teacher.

"They have both done so much for ROWVA. To say replacing them will be difficult is an understatement. In a time of nationally recognized teacher shortages, losing these two teachers is especially concerning," she said.

Andrew Bowman says the differences between the Johnsons and the board could have been worked out.

"We could have resolved the issues in a manner where both they could remain and flourish at ROWVA, and our students would have been better for it;' Bowman said. "I think we could have made it win-win for them to stay."

In his resignation letter, Chris Johnson wrote about how the district had changed under the board's direction.

"The ROWVA family has changed from one that supports and nurtures our students to a broken one that seems to care and support a single demographic without concern for the unique and changing needs of the student population," he wrote.
"The compassionate community that I was proud to be a part of is gone. This has become a place that discriminates against diversity and that bans messages and ideas instead of facilitating tolerance and open mindedness.

"This is not the ROWVA School District that I fell in love with and not one I want to be a part of any longer," Chris Johnson wrote.

Transgender issue arises at high school

One of the issues raised in Traci Johnson's resignation letter was that of supporting transgender students.

"I do not regret supporting our transgender homecoming candidate," Traci Johnson wrote. "I do not regret helping to put together a policy that made our transgender students feel safe while also alleviating the concern that students would be allowed to barge into the bathroom of the opposite gender:"

Johnson would not elaborate on these efforts when contacted by The Register-Mail.

Student Lizzie Wicks says the school is sometimes not supportive of LGBTQ+ students.

She said there has been a recent surge of derogatory use of the word "gay," and she witnessed an incident in the school where harmful homophobic language was used against a student repeatedly and no punishment followed.

She said she considered the school mostly intolerant, but said having the transgender student elected by the students to the homecoming court was a big step forward.

"The person elected to the court is actually a close friend," Wicks said. "Having him voted on to the court, it was very important. We all believed that ROWVA was not a safe place for transgender students. The students chose him for a reason. I think it's because he's friends with most of the kids in his class."

"It's entirely possible that they can participate in activities and be accepted by the majority of their class,". Wicks said.

The transgender issue did surface at the school board, although the impetus is not clear.

The board meeting minutes for the Oct. 18, 2021, show that Superintendent Sornberger discussed with the board the administrative procedure for transgender students under policy 7:10.

"There was a discussion of what that the administrative procedure looks like," Sornberger told The Register-Mail. "It's a checklist."

Wicks said about a month ago the student council created He/They and She/They signs for the school bathrooms.

"We have a lot of nonbinary students."

Wicks said unfortunately the signs were pulled down by students within the hour.

The school district is planning to renovating the locker room area and that project calls for two or three gender neutral bathrooms.
Asked if this was a step toward inclusion, Sornberger said other schools are doing it and it some people felt like it would be a good place to start. The bids for the project will be opened next month.

'Recent events have not reflected well on ROWVA

Mary Stiers says pride in the ROWVA schools is more difficult after the issues in the past eight months.

"The recent events have not reflected well on ROWVA," Stiers said. "Everyone I've talked to hates the division and is embarrassed by it. In the past I have always been proud to be associated with ROWVA. Now, it's harder."

Bowman feels the controversies have done some damage, but is hopeful they can be lessons.

"It is sad to think that so much community goodwill has eroded over issues that, while tense, need not have been zero-sum," Bowman said. "We have all lost to an extent over the past two years on that front.

"But the future is bright and we should be wiser in not letting small disagreements escalate into bitter contempt. These recent events reflect disagreements that can be overcome with a shared, noble purpose: investing in our youth."

Former board member Melissa Shepherd was clearly frustrated by the majority and worried about the school district's future when she resigned.

"... I have heard concerns with the future of our district and the damage being caused," Shepherd wrote in her resignation letter. "Our community should be concerned and outraged. These four votes have been used as threat to those who don't see it their way. I've come to realize that even with all my efforts to mend relationships with our administration, staff, and students, they are null and void by the majority of the board."

"It breaks my heart the changes this district will face and the re-building that will need to happen," Shepherd wrote.

Bowman thinks compromise can lead the way, especially with conflict over what is taught.

"The best compromise is that this (curriculum) committee enact a policy that all curricula from the PREVIOUS year be posted online," Bowman suggests. "All teachers have digitized their records at this point, so it's a matter of uploading their lesson plans at the end of the school year:'

Bowman thinks at fall open house the curriculum committee could meet with teachers to go over curriculum.

"It should be informal, with the only formal provision being reviewing teachers' suggestions for LARGE material changes to their respective curricula for the coming year. If there are no material deviations, then it becomes a meeting to discuss what teachers need from the community.

"We let teachers teach and use the last year's resources for community transparency," Bowman said.

Search for new superintendent underway
At the top of the agenda for the board, along with filling the remaining two board seats, is to replace its superintendent.

The board accepted Somberger's resignation March 10. He is leaving to become superintendent of Jasper County Community Unit School District for the 2022-2023 school year. This is his eighth year serving as ROWAs superintendent. The Jasper district, east of Effingham, has an enrollment of 1,225, twice the size of ROWVAs 600 students.

Somberger did not refer to any board issues in his letter of resignation.

"With heartfelt gratitude for the tremendous opportunity I received in leading this outstanding district for the past eight years, I have submitted my resignation as ROWVA superintendent effective June. 30;' he said.

Several in the community said he will be difficult to replace.

Stiers referred to Somberger as a highly effective and respected superintendent.

"It could be difficult to find someone of his caliber to lead ROWVA."

Swanson agrees.

"I am concerned about the loss of an excellent superintendent that ROWVA has had for the past eight years," she said. "His resignation and that of other teachers reflect poorly on the district."

The board is working with the Illinois Association of School Boards to try and find a superintendent by July 1. They are considering candidates with administrative and teaching experience and will require that person to eventually reside in the school district.