

Board members threaten a budget veto if DEI programs aren't dropped



At Anoka-Hennepin schools, diversity leads to divisiveness

Story by ANTHONY LONETREE
Photos by CARLOS GONZALEZ • Star Tribune staff

The Anoka-Hennepin school board is at risk of a budget impasse that could shut down the state's largest district, and students of color and LGBTQ students are caught in the middle of the debate.

So, they marched this week and appeared before board members in a two-hour-plus public comment session Monday during which Ishmael Kamara, 17, a leader of the Black Student Union at Blaine High School, defended diversity and equity programs now threatened with cuts by a conservative bloc on the board.

"By preserving and strengthening these initiatives, we can affirm our commitment to creating an inclusive, equitable and enriching educational environment for all students, and understand that diversity and equity is not a part of Anoka-Hennepin, it is Anoka-Hennepin," he said.

Board Member Linda Hoekman, whose election last

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SHUTDOWN AHEAD?

Anoka-Hennepin Board Member Matt Audette, above, listens during a school board meeting on Monday in Anoka.

At top, hundreds joined a Youth for Unity rally and march held before the meeting.

Standoff could lead to district shutdown

◀ **ANOKA** from Al year helped create a conservative counter to the board's progressive bloc, later described the strong showing of students lined up against her and her colleagues as being perhaps the product of "misinformation" and "misplaced activism."

"Maybe," she said, "they need to express some outrage that the achievement gap is evidence that minority students are not receiving the quality education they deserve."

The hundreds who marched to Monday's meeting were spurred by an April 12 Facebook post by Board Member Matt Audette stating that he and newcomers Hoekman and Zach Arco had made clear to colleagues they could not vote in "good conscience" for a 2024-25 budget if the district continued to fund activities spreading "divisive, one-sided views."

The stakes, as such, have been raised in the debate over social issues that have dominated school board races across the Twin Cities' suburbs as well as the nation in the post-pandemic years.

Among the efforts that Audette says the trio could not support were teachings on systemic racism, the use of preferred pronouns, culturally responsive teaching, social justice, social-emotional learning, the state's new social studies standards, the use of restorative practices in place of suspensions and expulsions and the flying of any flag other than the American flag.

That sets up a potential 3-to-3 vote standoff on a budget that must be approved by July 1, and if the stalemate were to hold, school district operations could cease at that time.

On Monday, the district said it was preparing a report on how an impasse would impact students and staff and the dis-

trict, in general, including the suspension of pay and benefits for employees, the shutdown of summer school and child-care programming and the immediate stoppage of construction projects at 30 district facilities.

The Anoka-Hennepin Parents Alliance responded Monday with a written statement saying: "Instead of digging heels in and talking of shutdown, the district should show respect for our diverse community by presenting ideas for compromise within the law," the group said.

Hoekman and Arco, who is the board's co-chair, were backed last year by the Minnesota Parents Alliance.

The six-member board's progressive bloc — co-chair Kacy Deschene, Michelle Langenfeld and Jeff Simon — have been backed by the local teachers union in their elections.

On Monday, Val Holthus, the union's president, said during the public comment session that the union's repre-

sentative assembly had unanimously passed a "no confidence" vote calling for the resignations of Audette, Arco and Hoekman. She said the list of budget demands was "a transparent partisan attempt to hold the school district — and more despicably, students — hostage in a partisan war."

Nearly one-quarter of the more than 50 speakers at Monday's meeting spoke in favor of the conservatives or their views. Shannon Fletcher, a parent wearing an Anoka-Hennepin Parents Alliance T-shirt, said she opposed the teaching of "racial biases and views that one race is an oppressor to all."

"We're a proud Native American and LGBT family, and I don't want my kids taught they're oppressed beings," she told board members. "This is damaging to their self-esteem. I teach them they can do anything they set their mind to with some hard work."

In 2009 and 2010, Anoka-

Hennepin was wracked by the suicides of several students whose parents and friends identified as gay or who were perceived as gay. That brought national scrutiny over the district's handling of issues of bullying and sexual orientation, and the scrapping of a "sexual orientation curriculum policy" requiring staff to remain neutral on issues of sexual orientation.

On Monday, Carson Johnson, co-leader of the Gay Straight Alliance student group at Champlin Park High School, pushed back on the idea that racial and gender equity initiatives were somehow divisive.

"If diversity divided us, then this rally would never happen, as every race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, class and school is here in solidarity," he said.

The school board was scheduled to resume budget discussions Tuesday evening.



Photos by CARLOS GONZALEZ • carlos.gonzalez@startribune.com

A Youth for Unity rally before an Anoka-Hennepin school board meeting on Monday drew hundreds of protesters. They marched in response to a board member's Facebook post about the district funding activities he described as "divisive," including the state's new social studies standards.

