

One wild school board meeting; CASEY: Thursday's Roanoke County School Board meeting was a wild one (copy) More than 30 people, mostly Roanoke County residents,....

**One wild school board meeting; CASEY: Thursday's Roanoke County School Board meeting was a wild one (copy) More than 30 people, mostly Roanoke County residents, addressed school board members about May 18 accusations that "sexual predators disguised as teachers and staff" are "grooming" children at Glen Cove elementary.**

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Metro Edition

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## **Body**

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Perhaps the best term to describe Thursday night's Roanoke County School Board meeting is "a doozy." If you haven't seen it yet, I urge you to watch the replay on YouTube. It lasted more than two hours. The interesting parts begin around the 34:50 time stamp.

In all, 32 citizens addressed the board. Among them were current and past Roanoke County students, current and retired Roanoke County teachers, a nurse, mental health therapists and more. A handful were residents of Roanoke.

Almost all focused their ire at child "grooming" accusations hurled during the board's May 18 meeting. During that, parent Damon Gettier went on a 4-minute, 30-second-long rant in which he publicly accused educators at Glen Cove Elementary of being "sexual predators disguised as teachers and staff." (Gettier's 9-year-old son attends Glen Cove.)

One by one, the speakers excoriated board members for failing to defend the school system's employees from Gettier's broadsides. One of the first was Ashley Hendrix, a biology teacher at Northside High who identified herself as a member of the LGBT community.

"Your silence on these disgusting claims against our staff and members and allies of our community shows that you do not support all your staff and all of your students," Hendrix said. "We are not predators, we are not child-groomers, we are none of the disgusting remarks that have been thrown our way these past few weeks."

Hendrix finished her 3-minute-limited remarks by telling her employer, the school board, that she would support efforts to recall and replace its elected members. Tiffany Sandifer, a parent who later told board members that she would support recalling them, emailed me Friday that she's launching a recall effort.

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The room was so jammed that the school board opened up an overflow-crowd room into which video of the meeting was streamed. That was standing-room only, too.

After the speakers finished, Superintendent Ken Nicely seemed to address Gettier's accusations, though obliquely rather than directly.

"We're immensely proud of our over 1,200 teachers that work hard to teach our students, welcome them, support them and respect them. And to teach them to love to read, write, investigate scientific principles, perform in the arts, innovate and problem solve," Nicely began.

He ended with: " . . . We support and commend the efforts of our teachers and principals to provide a caring and respectful environment focused on learning for all students."

No school board member uttered a word about Gettier's accusations. Mike Wray and Tim Greenway said they appreciated the speakers' comments. Hudson said he "echoed" Nicely's remarks.

The meeting left a couple of other questions hanging, on which we'll focus.

One was the notable absence of Cheryl Facciani, the school board member who represents Windsor Hills. Where was she?

Friday morning, an answer seemed to appear via social media, on a Facebook group known as Roanoke County Parents for a Common Sense School Board.

It was a screenshot of a Thursday evening post Facciani purportedly put on Facebook, of her and some other women at Thursday night's Darius Rucker concert at Elmwood Park's amphitheater. (I didn't see the post Friday when I checked Facciani's Facebook page, but that may be because we're not Facebook "friends.")

The sold-out concert was a fundraiser benefitting the Life Ring Foundation. General admission tickets were \$60, and \$8 from each ticket supported the foundation's Fighting Kids Cancer initiative.

Friday morning via email I asked Facciani why she skipped Thursday's school board meeting, and whether she had instead attended a concert at Elmwood Park. Here's her reply:

"I do not like to miss school board meetings but raising money for cancer is a major priority of mine. I have a strong family history of cancer which includes both me and my husband," Facciani wrote.

"I felt compelled to support Fighting Kids' Cancer, Life Ring Foundation's five-year initiative to transform the state of care for children diagnosed with cancer in Southwest Virginia. 100% of the money raised will be used to add desperately needed resources to what will be the new pediatric cancer treatment center in Roanoke Valley," she added.

I responded, "Couldn't you have supported fundraising by the Life Ring Foundation by purchasing a ticket and attending the school board meeting?" She didn't answer.

The school board established its meeting schedule by unanimous vote on Jan. 5. According to a review of school board minutes, Thursday marked the third scheduled school board meeting Facciani missed in 2023, and the fourth overall. The others for which she was absent were work sessions March 2 and June 1. She also missed a "special" work session April 27, that had not been scheduled in January.

The other question concerns a brief verbal fracas near the meeting's end involving board Chairman **Brent Hudson**.

As he began his closing remarks, the crowd seemed frustrated that the only speaker's comments Hudson acknowledged during the meeting were those from a nurse, Judy Flinchum. Flinchum asked the board for low-carb school meals for diabetic students.

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Hudson began his comments by congratulating Roanoke County student athletes and sports teams for athletic accomplishments. That's when a male voice from the crowd loudly interrupted him by calling out, "Actions speak louder!"

"Hold on a second," Hudson interjected. "Nope, nope, it's not time for public discussion now. You're going to allow the same respect that we allowed you for the past two hours. You're free to leave."

For the proceeding 30 seconds, Hudson continued the athletic congratulations, deeming them "very important."

Next, a man from the crowd called out, "All four of you are cowards!" And as people exited, another unseen person in the room again said, "Actions speak louder!"

Up to that juncture, Hudson occupied the moral high ground, because he was the one being rudely interrupted. But then he suddenly and inexplicably let loose a two word-exclamation - "Parents' rights!" - before picking up again with the sports congratulations. It seemed weird and out of context.

The phrase is a rallying cry of Moms for Liberty, a not-exactly grassroots conservative organization, founded three years ago in Florida, that has more than 260 county chapters across the country.

Among the battles it typically fight are "the LGBTQ agenda" in public schools. (There's a **Moms for Liberty** chapter in Roanoke County, but nobody who spoke at Thursday's meeting identified themselves as a member.)

In a Friday morning email, I asked **Hudson** the reason for the exclamation - and whether he agreed with Damon Gettier's slur that Glen Cove Elementary educators are "sexual predators disguised as teachers and staff."

Hudson responded: "I appreciate you reaching out. I have no comment at this time."

The school board next meets for a work session July 13. Its next regular meeting is July 20.

Maybe he'll have a comment at one of those.

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## Graphic

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Tiffany Sandifer, parent of a student in Roanoke County schools, told county School Board members Thursday that she would support efforts to recall and replace them. Sandifer was upset the school board hasn't denounced May 18 public accusations by a parent who claimed some Glen Cove Elementary educators are "sexual predators disguised as teachers and staff." Screenshot from YouTube A Facebook post, under the name of Roanoke County School Board member Cheryl Facciani, is in reference to the Darius Rucker concert in Elmwood Park Thursday evening. Of the \$60 general admission ticket price, \$8 went to raise money for cancer research. Facciani later explained that she missed the school board meeting because "raising money for cancer is a major priority of mine." Screen shot from Facebook After comments some viewed as anti-LGBTQ+ were made during last month's Roanoke County School Board meeting, citizens came out in support of those issues within the school system during Thursday night's meeting. DAVID HUNGATE photos, The Roanoke Times After comments some viewed as anti-LGBTQ+ were made during last month's Roanoke County School Board meeting, citizens came out in support of those issues within the school system during Thursday night's meeting. DAVID HUNGATE photos, The Roanoke Times Eric Ross holds a sign during Thursday's Roanoke County School Board meeting. DAVID HUNGATE, The Roanoke Times Eric Ross holds a sign during Thursday's Roanoke County School Board meeting. DAVID HUNGATE, The Roanoke Times Glen Cove Elementary School student Hadley Newell speaks in support of her school's teachers and staff Thursday night after comments some viewed as anti-LGBTQ+ were made during the

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May Roanoke County School Board meeting. DAVID HUNGATE, The Roanoke Times Glen Cove Elementary School student Hadley Newell speaks in support of her school's teachers and staff Thursday night after comments some viewed as anti-LGBTQ+

## Classification

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