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OPINION | DECLARATIONS

San Francisco Schools the Left

The landslide recall of three Board of Education members will have major national repercussions.



By

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Attendees at a pro-recall cheer as they celebrate in San Francisco, Feb. 15.

PHOTO: GABRIELLE LURIE/SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE VIA GETTY IMAGES

It was a landslide. That's the important fact of San Francisco's school-board recall election: There was nothing mixed or ambivalent about the outcome. Three members were resoundingly ejected from their jobs: 79% voted to oust Alison Collins, 75% to fire Gabriela López, the board president, and 72% to remove Faauuga Moliga, the vice president.

This was a vote against progressive education officials in the heart of liberal San Francisco. It is a signal moment because of its head-chopping definitiveness, its clarity, its swiftness and its unignorable statement by parents on what they must have and won't accept. It was a battle in the Democratic Party's civil war between liberals and the progressive left. And it marks a continuation of the parents' rebellion that surfaced in November in Virginia's upset gubernatorial election.

 OPINION: POTOMAC WATCH

The Revolt of the Parents Is Spreading



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It is in the way of things that Democratic leaders in Congress won't feel they have an excuse to crack down hard on the progressive wing of their party until the entire party loses big in the 2022 elections. But Democratic voters on the ground aren't waiting for permission. They are taking a stick to wokeness whether the party's leaders do or not.

You know most of what was at issue. During the height of the pandemic, when San Francisco's schools were closed, parents were increasingly frustrated and newly angry. They saw that remote learning was an inadequate substitute for children being in the classroom. Many sensed that a year or two out of school would leave their children with an educational deficit that would not be repaired. The teachers unions balked at reopening and the Board of Education approached the problem with what seemed muted interest. Although they did a lot of word-saying featuring impenetrable jargon, as school boards do, they didn't have a plan and the schools didn't open.

While the board was failing to open the schools it was doing other things. It produced government by non sequitur. The board focused on issues of woke antiracism and oppression. The problem wasn't whether the kids were getting an education, it was whether the boarded-up schools had unfortunate names. They spent months researching the question and proposed renaming a third of the system's 125 schools. Many were named for previously respectable people like Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Francis Scott Key and Robert Louis Stevenson. Their names were "inappropriate" because their lives and actions could be connected with charges of racism, sexism and colonialism. From the San Francisco Chronicle: "The move shocked many principals and families, who questioned whether changing a name was a mid-pandemic priority when their children cannot physically attend the school in question."

The public rose up—stop this stuff, get our kids back in school! The backlash intensified when it was revealed some of the board's historical research was dependent on cutting and pasting from Wikipedia.

So it wasn't only government by non sequitur, it was inept. The board backed off and said, essentially, that the matter needed more study.

The board soon moved onto another item on the progressive wish list. It homed in on academically elite public high schools that based admission on testing and grades. For people who can't afford a \$40,000-a-year private-school tuition, such schools are a godsend; they were designed long ago to offer demanding course study to students with limited money but demonstrable gifts.

The board decided too many Asian-American and white students were accepted in the schools. So they voted to scrap testing and replace it with a permanent lottery system for admission at Lowell High, one of only two campuses in the district to use merit-based admissions. (The decision was later overturned by lawsuits.)

Now parents exploded, very much including the Asian community. It got more heated when it was discovered Ms. Collins had an old tweet accusing Asian-Americans of using "white supremacist thinking to assimilate and 'get ahead.'" She seemed rather a creepy and bigoted person to have in a position of such authority.

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Even aside from that, parents who were up nights helping their children with homework, seeing that schoolwork was done and discipline learned, felt their effort was being discounted and their children abandoned to abstract notions of equity. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right. Kids have to be taught to earn their way through effort. Lotteries don't teach them that; lotteries teach them it's all luck.

Now the recall process took off.

It did not help that just before the pandemic, in 2019, the board had famously turned to censorship. There was a big, colorful series of Depression-era frescoes in a local high school. They'd been there since the 1930s and were commissioned by the Works Progress Administration of the New Deal, a stylized depiction of the founding of America that included slaves and American Indians. The board decided it was racist, cruel, reductive; there was the implication it was right-wing art. In fact the frescoes were the work of a Russian immigrant to America, Victor Arnautoff, who was a communist and trying to bring attention to the cruelty present in some of America's history. No matter, it was offensive, so the board decided to paint over the murals.

Art-sensitive San Francisco rose up: This is akin to book burning, you don't lay waste to art. The board then decided it wouldn't paint over the frescoes, merely conceal them behind barriers of some sort.

What was astonishing as you followed the story is what seemed the board members' shock at parental pushback. They seemed so detached from the normal hopes of normal people. They seemed honestly unaware of them. It was as if they were operating in some abstract universe in which their decisions demonstrated their praiseworthy antiracist bona fides. But voters came to see their actions as a kind of woke progressive vandalism that cleverly avoided their central responsibility: to open the schools.

School boards somehow always seem to think they are immune from pushback, that their pronouncements will never be opposed because they can barely be understood.

But people have a way of seeing. If, during a pandemic lockdown, board members speak often and thoughtfully of the increased likelihood of the abuse of neglected children, one will get a sense of their motivation and heart. If instead they dilate on political issues that deflect, one will get a different, darker view of their motivation and heart.

That's why the three in San Francisco were fired.

What happened shows again that there is a real parents movement going on, and it is going to make a difference in our politics.

Democrats dismiss these issues as "culture-war distractions." They are not; they are about life at its most real, concrete and immediate. That easy dismissal reveals the party's distance from the lives of its own constituents.

To think parents would sacrifice their children for your ideology, or an ideology coming from within your ranks that you refuse to stand up to, is political malpractice at a high level.

Joe Biden received 85% of the vote in San Francisco in 2020. Those board members just lost their seats by more than 70%. A cultural rebellion within the Democratic Party has begun.

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