

WEST CHESTER, Pa.—At the end of a school board meeting that featured glowing accolades for students and staff at a West Chester middle school, parents spoke out about a darker side to the school: bullying. They say the issue is out of control and is not being properly addressed.

The West Chester Area School Board held its monthly meeting at the district's Spellman Education Center on May 24, 2023. Ten parents from Fugett Middle School spoke out at the meeting about prolonged and increasing violence and bullying among students, which they say the school administration has ignored.

Two parents who spoke at that meeting shared their concerns with The Epoch Times on June 2. Both said they hope for big changes to the school environment.

Stephanie Beisser has three children, two of whom attend Fugett Middle School. Her eighth grader was bullied more than once, she said.

Bullying and fighting are a consistent problem at Fugett, Beisser said, noting that enrollment has dropped as parents pull students from the public school for safety reasons.

At the meeting, Beisser quoted an anonymous teacher at the school as saying, "We are in crisis."

According to Beisser, Fugett principal Dionne Fears dismissed parents' concerns by saying "this is the society we live in." "She also said students enjoy watching fights," Beisser told the school board.

"This is not the society we live in," Beisser responded. "This is not the society we choose to raise our children in. Teachers cannot teach in this environment. Students' grades are dropping due to the constant distractions and disruptions."

Fear of Retaliation

Gemma Hrevatis has two children. One is a fifth grader, who, she says, will not attend Fugett next year due to the lack of safety at the school.

At the May 24 meeting, the last meeting of the school year, Hrevatis said she was speaking on behalf of parents who were afraid to come forward for fear of retaliation against their children who attend the school.

Hrevatis said that about 30 percent of students in a survey reported being bullied. She described how one student was recently harassed for 10 minutes during gym class, with no teacher's help, before the fight escalated to physical violence. The victim suffered a concussion and dislocated jaw. Eventually, a student intervened to help break up the fight.

Further, Hrevatis stated that families from other community middle schools "are not experiencing the same events at the alarming rate with which they are occurring at Fugett."

At the close of the meeting, Kalia Reynolds, the interim superintendent of West Chester Area School District, said parents who spoke could expect a follow-up phone call from school administration.

Reynolds also noted that a community meeting is scheduled. "I would not want as a parent or community member for you to question what our next steps are to ensure that your child has a strong end to the school year, and also that you know what our plan is for the upcoming year."

In April, Beisser formed a concerned parents group to address bullying concerns. The group now numbers more than 90 parents.

A change.org petition calling for Fears to be replaced was started on May 24.

The Epoch Times reached out to Fears and to Sue Tiernan, president of the West Chester Area school board, for comment.

Cafeteria Bullying

Beisser said the cafeteria seems to be a big source of the bullying at Fugett.

Last year her eighth grader had a personal experience with cafeteria bullying. “A child took food and put it into her mouth. She has a severe food intolerance; that is life-threatening,” Beisser said. Because of that and other incidents including name-calling and teasing, her daughter chose to avoid the cafeteria for several months.

Beisser said her third child will go to Fugett next year. That makes her even more passionate about the issue.

“Why I’m really invested in this? Because I’m not going anywhere. My family is ingrained in the school. We’ve got many more years.” She said she is a “true believer” in public education.

She expressed her appreciation that some school board members reached out to her after she spoke at the West Chester Area school board meeting.

Addressing School Safety

Beisser offered three suggestions for improving the school safety issue.

First, there needs to be a stronger administration in place that will adhere to the school district policy. “If other schools can adhere to a zero-tolerance [bullying] policy, why can’t Fugett?”

Second, teachers need to be trained to stop a fight when it’s happening, she advised.

Beisser’s third suggestion is to have more parent involvement. Having parent volunteers in school hallways will help curb bullying, she said.



Parent Stephanie Beisser spoke to The Epoch Times about Fugett Middle School’s bullying issue, on June 2, 2023. (Screenshot from Zoom meeting/The Epoch Times)

Overwhelming Parental Response

Beisser described what led her to form a concerned parents’ group.

On March 23, during a drama club performance for the eighth grade, students began acting inappropriately. The disturbance involved only a few students, but

it was allowed to continue for “roughly 45 minutes.” The bullies made sexual moaning noises, threw objects at drama club members on stage, and shouted insults at the actors.

“This was not just a one-time, one-child thing. This was a public display of bullying done in front of over 300 students, administrators, and staff members,” Beisser said. “Nobody stopped. Nobody stood up and said anything. And the response from the school was very dismissive.”

About three weeks later, after bringing her concerns to the West Chester school board, Beisser had received no response. Meanwhile, she said, many parents had reached out to her in response to a Facebook post about the incident, asking, “How are you going to help? What are you going to do to really put a stop to the bullying?”

In one day alone, over a dozen parents contacted her, saying their children had been bullied and describing the actions they had taken.

Based on the overwhelming parental response, Beisser held a Zoom meeting and formed a concerned parents group. With over 90 parents in the group, the list keeps growing. Many parents who are new to the school have grave concerns about their children’s safety, Beisser said.

‘Bigger Than Fugett Middle School’

Hrevatis told The Epoch Times that she made the decision not to let her son attend Fugett after talking to several fifth-grade parents. She heard stories about children being bullied, about fights and cyberbullying. She listened to parents’ concern for their children’s safety and their dismay at the school administration’s lack of communication.

“It was really disheartening to me. Some of the stories are actually heartbreaking. You have to wonder about the effect that these incidents and the school environment are going to have on the mental health of these kids,” Hrevatis said.

“It’s bigger than Fugett Middle School. It’s bigger than pointing a finger and saying it’s this person’s fault. We’re in a mental health epidemic right now.”

“If our kids are in this sort of an environment, with everything else they have to face, it’s just not going to be a good outcome. That is what my main concern is.”



Gemma Hrevatis shared her concerns regarding Fugett Middle School’s bullying issue, on June 2, 2023. (Screenshot from Zoom meeting/The Epoch Times)

Hrevatis said it was hard for her family to make the decision about where to send their son. There was no perfect option, she said, whether it be homeschooling, cyber school, Catholic school, or “super expensive” private school.

“We kind of had to weigh everything and see what was going to work out best for us,” she said. Her measure of a good school is one that nurtures a child from the

inside out, she said, setting them up to be good citizens in the world, while getting a good basic education.

“When I was in school, you respected your teachers, and your parents trusted that your teachers were going to discipline you,” said Hrevatis. “That’s what I want for my kids. I want them to have consequences [when] they act out at school, just like they would at home.”

Like Beisser, Hrevatis thinks increasing the presence of adults in the school will help reduce bullying. Phones add an entirely new aspect to bullying, she said.

West Chester Area School District has 17 schools. Fugett Middle School is one of 3 middle schools in the district. According to Public School Review, Fugett Middle School was ranked within the top 30 percent of Pennsylvania’s 2,549 schools (overall) for the 2020-21 school year. The school serves 875 students in grades 6-8.

No Left Turn in Education provided information about this West Chester area School Board meeting.