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NEWS

Akron school board elects Diana Autry as its president, Carla Jackson as vice president

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The Akron Public Schools board of education Monday elected two veteran members to lead it during redistricting, restructuring and two potential property tax levies on November's ballot.

Diana Autry, first appointed to the board in 2019 and later elected, had previously served as the board's vice president before her colleagues Monday promoted her to president.

She replaces former President Derrick Hall, who did not seek reelection.

Autry, a registered nurse, has worked for Akron Children's Hospital since 2002.

Carla Jackson, who is entering her third year on the board, will serve as vice president.

Jackson, a middle school principal at a private Christian school in Akron, last year drew unwanted attention after sharing videos on social media that some viewed as homophobic and transphobic.

In one video, a person speaking to a California school board appears to equate a high school allowing students to fill out a form "to change their name or their sex" with adults talking to children about sexual acts, which she says would make them pedophiles.

Jackson posted on Facebook last year in response to a post from an Akron schools graduate who called her a bigot, saying, "I am far from a bigot."

"I'm a Christian first," Jackson said at the time, adding that being a Christian also means she believes in "do no harm."

But some in the LGBTQ community raised alarm, pointing out that Jackson cast the single dissenting vote against two policies affirming staff and students' right to use their chosen

names and pronouns at school. Both policies passed.

How Jackson might handle future Akron school issues involving LGBTQ students and staff did not come up before the vote.

No board members asked questions of her or of Autry before electing them to lead the board.

Afterward, newly elected board member Barbara Sykes stood up at least twice during the meeting asking about board transparency and emphasizing that better transparency could build trust between the board and the community.

Among other things, Sykes wanted the board to hold some of its meetings at different schools instead of district headquarters downtown.

Schools are closer to where parents and taxpayers live, she said, but people need plenty of notice to carve out time to attend.

Board meetings at schools, Autry said, were already in the works, though she didn't yet know which meetings would be at which schools.

Sykes later demanded to know the specific reasons the president was taking the board into executive session at the end of its public meeting.

There are only six reasons under Ohio law that allow public officials to take a meeting private, Sykes said.

After a bit of scrambling, Autry told Sykes there were two issues: one fell under the legal exemption, and the other involved personnel.

There was no discussion about two big issues this year: Redistricting and possible levies needed to stave off a potential deficit and to rebuild North high school.

But Superintendent Michael Robinson said there has been a lot happening since the board last month voted to approved the "Blueprint for Excellence."

The plan can be seen at the district's website akronschools.com under "Strategic Plan" on the top menu bar.

"What people may not understand is we're restructuring this district," said Robinson, who joined the district in August.

What all the restructuring may involve is still being worked out, but some people may lose jobs or shift to other positions, he said. He did not specify which district employees could be impacted.

But he did note that the district has not put enough “concentration around communications” so people know what’s happening in the schools. His upcoming budget aims to beef up school communications, he said.

Robinson also said he wants full-day pre-kindergarten in the district so children are performing at or above grade level when they start school.

The superintendent Monday vowed to be “very transparent about what we’re doing...so that people understand what and why we’re doing things...even if people don’t agree,” he said. “I want to see us thriving as Akron Public Schools.”