

Richmondmag

‘Glows and Grows’

Can the Richmond School Board work out its differences?

by [Scott Bass](#)

May 19, 2022 1:55 PM

As Friday afternoon pick-me-ups go, the timing couldn't have been much better.

On May 6, Richmond Public Schools Superintendent Jason Kamras leads a group of photographers, reporters, school officials and local politicians — including Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney and state Sen. Joe Morrissey — down the hallway at Boushall Middle School just after lunch to surprise Kiara Thompson, an eighth-grade science teacher, with the 2022 RPS Teacher of the Year Award. She doesn't know it's coming. As a media crush pours into her classroom unannounced, Thompson's eyes well up with joy.

“Great teaching is magical, but it is not magic,” Kamras tells the group of educators and school officials who assemble in the school library a few minutes later, where Thompson is presented with flowers, balloons and the official pomp that comes with being crowned the district's top educator. He, of course, is referring to the work that goes into teaching — the long hours before and after school, especially during the last two years of pandemic-induced challenges. A group of cheerleaders bring the point home: “You've. Got. To. Work it out.”

As the ceremony wraps up, School Board Chairwoman Shonda Harris-Muhammed and fellow School Board member Nicole Jones are soaking in the warm fuzzies, sitting and chatting in plastic chairs, pontificating on the recent growing pains of the nine-member board.

“In 2021, before I became chair, I made it a habit for me to review School Board meetings to see how I can be a better School Board member,” Harris-Muhammed says. She watched for the little things, like moments when she might have talked over someone, or misinterpreted a question. She made a chart of “glows and grows”

to help identify areas for improvement. The goal, she says, is “to become a superior school board, like school board of the year.”

She quickly catches herself. The Virginia School Boards Association’s annual honor is perhaps a bit lofty, especially after the last few months. “My goal is not to make school board of the year,” she concedes, “that’s not it.”

Jones, however, playfully interjects, “Mine is.”

Teachers and school boards of the year notwithstanding, Harris-Muhammed knows there is considerable work to do. During the last six months, political infighting over everything from the school budget, the size of the new George Wythe High School, the future of Richmond Virtual Academy and the rezoning of River City Middle School has led to emotional outbursts and school board members walking out of meetings.

The internal discord seemed to [reach its nadir](#) on April 25, the night the board voted down a proposal to rezone River City. Despite an increasingly dire need to reduce the school’s population — there are more than 1,600 students for a 1,500-seat school, which has led to overcrowded classrooms and hallways, scheduled bathroom breaks, an increase in student altercations, and other behavioral issues — the board voted down the proposal. The vote came after five months of community meetings and collaboration between the schools affected by the rezoning. Roughly 450 students would be shifted from River City to Boushall, Binford and Lucille Brown middle schools, a plan that had been greenlighted by the principals at all four.

A majority of the board rejected River City’s rezoning, citing concerns over the loss of open enrollment seats, particularly at Binford, and a supposed lack of information regarding cost and transportation. The superintendent called the vote “unconscionable” and literally broke down in tears. Within days, an email from Kamras notifying the board that Chief Operating Officer Alana Gonzalez had resigned, effective May 20, began to circulate on social media: “Despite my best efforts to retain her, she felt she could not effectively perform her duties given the current political climate, in which she has felt harassed, undermined, and demeaned,” he wrote.

Harris-Muhammed struggles with characterizing the recent conflicts and even declines the notion that there are “tensions” among board members, who fall into two distinct blocs: a five-member majority that includes Harris-Muhammed, Vice Chair Kenya Gibson, Mariah White, Jonathan Young and Stephanie Rizzi; and a four-member minority that includes Jones, Cheryl Burke, Dawn Page and Liz Doerr. While the disagreements vary and often don’t align with a clear political ideology, the two blocs are generally separated by those who support the recommendations of the superintendent and his staff (the minority) and those who do not (the majority). Harris-Muhammed says the internal conflicts aren’t out of the ordinary.

“I call it democracy at work,” she says, adding that this board took office in 2021, in the middle of a pandemic. “People can define them as tensions. I define them as not taking the time or the opportunity to get to know each other. We jumped right in in 2021. We didn’t have time to get to know each other. We didn’t have time to build capacity. Whenever you bring in a team to govern an entity, there needs to be time to learn [about each other] first.”

Others aren’t so sure. Taikein Cooper, executive director of Richmond-based [Virginia Excels](#), a nonprofit that advocates for racial equity in education, cringes at the suggestion that the board’s disagreements are little more than democratic due process.

“I continue to hear, ‘This is democracy in action, this is democracy in action.’ But one of the basic premises of democracy is the ability to compromise, and collaboration. And I’ve seen very few instances of that from this board,” Cooper says. “It seems like there are some members of the board who trust Kamras wholeheartedly, trust his professional expertise, and then there’s some members of the board who don’t trust anything Kamras says.

“And so, they are constantly in limbo and arguing with, ‘Hey, we should lean on the CEO, the superintendent’s professional expertise, and leave it up to him.’ And then the other part of the board, who does not trust Kamras, this is their way of micromanaging him. And that is hidden in this whole guise of, ‘This is democracy in action.’ ”

Making matters worse, the board is missing some key policy guardrails. Kimberly Bridges, an assistant professor of educational leadership at Virginia Commonwealth University, points to the River City Middle rezoning proposal. The flare-up that ensued after the board voted the measure down on April 25 is a case in point.

“Where is RPS’ rezoning policy? They don’t actually have one,” says Bridges, a former Richmond School Board member. Most school boards in Virginia have guidelines for when, and how, to redistrict students when schools become overcrowded or underutilized, she says. For instance, in Chesterfield, board policy authorizes the superintendent to “administratively adjust school attendance areas, after consultation with the affected School Board representative(s), when less than fifteen percent of the enrollment of each school will be affected,” or if an emergency or “overriding public need” arises.

“Any of those board member concerns about the budget, transportation — there’s nothing wrong with asking for those things at all. But you should have a policy that specifies what the rezoning criteria are,” says Bridges, suggesting that the Richmond School Board’s lack of such a policy is part of the problem. “You’ve given no policy guidance to the committee or the administration, so it’s no wonder that you have people talking past each other.”

Harris-Muhammed says the board is exploring adding such a policy in committee meetings but isn’t sure when that will occur. Whether a clearly spelled out rezoning policy could have prevented the recent tumult over River City (the rezoning was ultimately approved a week later, on May 2), she isn’t sure.

One thing she has done is reach out to the [Council of Great City Schools](#) for help in improving internal relations on the board. The council is conducting interviews with each of the nine members, along with the superintendent. At the board’s May 16 work session, she said the council had yet to report back to her with recommendations.

“I think we do have a problem with governance,” Doerr says in a recent interview, commending Harris-Muhammed’s effort to improve board relations. But she also worries the internal rift on the board has already caused too much damage. Doerr

says she knows of “several candidates” for executive-level positions at RPS who have declined offers due to the “politics of the board.”

“If that is illustrative of the culture at RPS, then I think it’s going to be really hard for us to attract and retain top talent, given the way that this board treats this administration,” she says.

For all the talk of improving personal relations and governance, during the May 16 work session, the school board members again found themselves at loggerheads over basic procedural measures — there was a reluctance by some to allow Kamras and his staff to make simple “budget transfers” without their oversight to balance the books at the end of the current fiscal year — along with a robust disagreement over how to staff the Richmond Virtual Academy.

The superintendent is reducing the size of the virtual academy staff as the pandemic wanes, and debate centered around how to allocate 30 full-time positions. This time, however, the board granted Kamras budget transfer authority and supported the superintendent’s recommendation for how to staff the virtual academy.

There was also a lengthy discussion about the city’s plan to relocate the Arthur Ashe Jr. Athletic Center as part of the Diamond District redevelopment project. The school system uses the property for some athletic events and has operational management of the facility, but the building is owned by the city (as are all school buildings). The redevelopment plan — the city is in the process of selecting a developer to build a new stadium for the Richmond Flying Squirrels as part of a larger retail, office and residential project — includes relocating Arthur Ashe, or at least its functional capacity as an athletic and events venue.

There was broad agreement that the school board should press City Hall for financial compensation as the property is redeveloped.

A sign of progress? Perhaps. With the Council of Great City Schools consultation and an upcoming School Board retreat in June, there will be more opportunities to find common ground, Harris-Muhammed says.

“We have to stay focused on what we are called to do, and that’s serving the children, regardless of what the noise is externally,” she says at the teacher of the year celebration, taking ownership of how the board members work together. “My job is to make sure that we continue to move in the direction of an upward trajectory.”