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**Capitol View  
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**School Board Meetings Are the New Political Hotbed**

There was a time when serving on the local school board was a position of honor for businessmen and women, retired educators and sometimes people with aspirations for a higher office. Nebraska communities are filled with those stories and those people.

But that was before the cancel culture and woke attitudes. The combination has resulted in downright chaos in some school districts where school board meetings have become hotbeds for debate and protest over mask mandates and other cultural trends. Some school boards face recall based on decisions and policies they have made.

Cancel culture is the practice of publicly rejecting, boycotting or ending support for particular people or groups because of their socially or morally unacceptable views in some people’s opinion. In other words, certain members of the public have appointed themselves the arbiters of right and wrong.

Woke is a term in the United States that originally referred to awareness about racial prejudice and discrimination. It eventually came to encompass an awareness of other issues of social inequality such as gender and sexual orientation.

Nebraska’s top election official, Secretary of State Bob Evnen, said he doesn’t think the rising discontent with school boards – and other elected bodies – reflects a change in Nebraskans.

Reflecting on his mostly uneventful eight years on the State Education Board, Evnen said it’s not the opinions of the citizens that have changed; it’s the proposals of the board members that have changed.

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“What is happening is there is an increasing number of people who are looking at some of our elected offices and asking, ‘How do we elect people who are more in line with what we believe is the right path to take? “he said.

Aye, there’s the rub. Determining right from wrong. As Ted Lasso would say, “doing the right thing is never the wrong thing.” Remember, we learned right and wrong from our parents, Sunday School teachers and public or private school teachers. Many of us studied the topic in college.

So, is the attitude change a result of the George Floyd death at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer and/or the pandemic? All we can say for sure is that before these events, parents rarely filled school board meetings unless an extracurricular activity or a gifted program was getting cut.

The agitated public is not only packing boardrooms, but they have become loud and rowdy. School officials have added security to meetings, controlled the length of time people can speak and ordered some uncooperative people removed for violating rules.

National analysts say Nebraska is not alone in facing these problems. John Halpin, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, said many of the battles in the states are more an outcome of America’s never-ending culture wars and ideological polarization “fueled by daily consumption of inflammatory news and social media.”

He said “everyone has an example of some moral outrage in the schools or communities that drive them to express themselves in forums such as school board meetings. The fact that this involves what kids may be learning or not learning makes people even more intense in their thoughts and feelings about it.”

Jon Valant, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said these battles are going to affect who runs local school boards in “ways that I don’t think are very healthy. I think we’re going to see some really extreme candidates who are running on issues that are really irrelevant to the day-to-day” concerns of school districts.

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A senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation, Mike Gonzales, said he doesn’t think that parents are at fault for being aggressive. School board members have operated under the radar for decades with little scrutiny from their constituents, so they aren’t accustomed to being challenged — either at meetings or at the polls.

Remember when school was all about reading, writing and arithmetic? Makes one yearn for the old days.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years.*