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Two Balto. Co. school board members share their vision

Gilliss, Schmidt question hybrid model, support Dance and embrace technology as critical

By Barbara Pash

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A hybrid school board on the horizon. Digital devices for all students. The proposal for a new elementary school at the site of Bykota Senior Center. With the start of a new school year, the Baltimore County Board of Education faces new challenges. advertisement

Board members don't ordinarily speak individually and it is President David Uhlfelder who presents the official voice of the school board. But in recent exclusive interviews with the Towson Times, two members of the board who represent Baltimore County Public Schools' central corridor, spoke about what the new school year holds with the proviso that their views were strictly their own.

Lawrence Schmidt has served on the Baltimore County Board of Education for five years, three as president and now as a member. Edward Gilliss began his term as a school board member last year.

Schmidt, an attorney, former Baltimore County zoning commissioner and ex-president of the Greater Towson Committee, represents the 3rd County Council district. Gilliss, an attorney, past president of the Maryland State Bar Association and a Towson resident, represents the 5th council district.

During the 2014 legislative session, the General Assembly voted in favor of a partially elected, or hybrid, school board in Baltimore County instead of the current all-appointed members. Beginning in 2018, the 12-member school board will consist of seven members elected from the seven councilmanic districts, four members appointed by the governor and one student member.

Neither Schmidt nor Gilliss favor a hybrid school board. They say there are drawbacks, in what Schmidt calls the "implementation issue" and in what both see as the possibility of introducing politics into the board.

"I haven't seen any evidence or consensus, at least on a national level, that either an elected or hybrid or appointed school board is better," said Schmidt, whose family members attended Baltimore County Public Schools and whose wife is a BCPS teacher.

"For people to say that one is better than the other there is no data to support it," Schmidt said.

"The way the current board is constituted is both effective and efficient, and very well serves the community. We have representatives from across the county and persons appointed because of their interest in schools," said Gilliss, a former president of the Dumbarton Middle School PTA whose three children attended BCPS.

Both men point to the fact that serving on the school board is voluntary. In other words, there is no compensation. To them, that raises the question of why?

Said Gilliss, "A hybrid school board might work and time will tell. But what if the motive of someone to serve on the school board is politically based? The risk is that politics will take an elevated position in the process."

Schmidt echoes the thought. Not only do parts of the bill that passed not make sense, he said, referring to how the hybrid board will be implemented, "but who is going to mount a campaign, which costs money, for something that doesn't pay?"

In August, the school board voted to give BCPS Superintendent Dallas Dance essentially a \$27,000 raise. Dance, whose annual salary was \$260,000, got \$5,000 in cash, covering his contribution to the state employees' retirement system and changing vacation days.

The board was sharply criticized for the raise. But both Schmidt and Gilliss defend it, arguing that Dance, after a year and a half as head of the 110,000-student, 18,000-employee, \$1.6 billion system, is doing a good job.

"The man is worth every penny of it," Schmidt said.

"He's a good communicator. He reaches out to people, he's met with parents, teachers, students and organizations," he said, noting as well Dance's "incredible energy and desire to improve and correct issues" that need to be addressed.

"From a substantive matter," Schmidt continued, "his technological initiatives are important. Dance is bringing Baltimore County schools into the 21st century."

Said Gilliss, "Dr. Dance is full of substance, full of energy, full of vision and able to carry out that vision. His skill set is good for the position he holds."

Both school board members compared Dance to the CEO of a corporation of equal size. "Show me an entity in this country where a CEO of an organization of that magnitude" was paid Dance's original salary, said Schmidt. "The raise brings him to the rest" of the CEOs' salary.

Likewise, Gilliss remarks that Dance and superintendents of systems as large as Baltimore County's are equivalent to CEOs. "The compensation voted by the board is commensurate with the salary earned by other superintendents in the region," Gilliss said.

The Board of Education recently met to discuss the capital budget. Operating budget work sessions won't begin until January.

For central corridor schools, Schmidt and Gilliss agree, two budget priorities stand out: renovating aging facilities and relieving overcrowded schools.

Baltimore County school buildings are the second oldest in the state, according to Schmidt. "It's not just adding air conditioning," he said of pending improvements, "but of wiring for the 21st-century technology" that BCPS wants to implement.

Gilliss talks about Dumbarton Middle School, a high-performing school that needs capital improvements.

One example is school security and installing a system for secure student, and visitor entry and exit.

Overcrowding appears to be particularly acute at the elementary school level. Schmidt referred to the opening of Mays Chapel Elementary School, the culmination of a two-year long process to relieve overcrowding in the central corridor.

Gilliss talked about a proposal to use Bykota Senior Center as the site for a new school. Both Baltimore County Executive Kevin Kamenetz and Superintendent Dance have expressed interest, he said. But that proposal is not without controversy.

"It would go a long way to addressing overcrowding," Gilliss said. "The community understands the need for additional seats and the Bykota location is an effective location to construct a school to satisfy elementary school needs."

As for the future of BCPS, Schmidt and Gillis identified the challenges facing schools in their district and the system over the next five years.

Schmidt raised the challenge of a changing school population and the diversity that results. BCPS is now a "minority-majority" system, meaning that Caucasian students represent less than half of the overall population. Of the non-white students, the largest subgroup is African-American, but it also includes Hispanics, Asians and Native Americans.

"Everyone has to recognize the diversity in the public schools," Schmidt said. "You have kids coming from different backgrounds, different socio-economic groups."

To Schmidt, the other challenge is continued implementation of the technological initiative that began this year with the Lighthouse Schools. There are 10 schools that will emphasize e-learning via digital devices for each student and 24/7 access to curriculum and teachers.

"Eventually it will be rolled out systemwide, all 174 BCPS total," Schmidt said. "This has been done elsewhere in the country, but it hasn't always been implemented well. We have to do it right."

Gilliss also praised the Lighthouse initiative, officially the Instructional Digital Conversion, and continuing to implement it in the future.

"One of the most substantial needs going forward is to ensure that our children are best educated both substantively and technologically. The Lighthouse program is the first step throughout the entire system," Gilliss said.