

SAD 17 descends to games of school board roulette

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By Nicole Carter

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REGION — Churn continues for Maine School Administrative District 17 as the school board will soon include three directors appointed by selectmen rather than elected by voters.

Municipal officials in Paris may have started a trend of local interference in Oxford Hills' eight-town school district business, appointing directors according to their political affiliations and referring to the district as a "quagmire" and "swamp."



Three Paris selectmen, Michael Bailey (left), Scott McElravy and Chair Christopher Summers all voted to appoint Troy Ripley to the SAD 17 school board. The seat became vacant when Director Julia Lester resigned ahead of a recall election. Paris selectmen accepted the petition and scheduled a recall election for Jan. 10, against the advice of their legal counsel. Also pictured, Paris Town Manager Dawn Noyes and Town Clerk Elizabeth Knox.

In Paris, two directors became the subject of a recall petition in October following the school board approving the first reading of a student gender identity policy ACAAA. One Oxford director, Stacia Cordwell, resigned on Dec. 5. And a fourth, West Paris Director and Board Chair Natalie Andrews, has announced that she will step down from her leadership role effective Jan. 17 and not seek reelection when her term expires in March, citing overriding responsibilities to her fulltime position as town manager for Bethel.

Paris representatives Julia Lester and Sarah Otterson were targeted for supporting the gender identity policy, which would include controversial provisions like requiring school staff to keep confidential from parents any discussion where students claim to be transgender. Paris resident Armand Norton circulated the petitions for their recall in October and gathered about 650 signatures before presenting them to that town's select board.

On Nov. 21 Paris selectmen voted four to one to accept the petitions, with Chair Christopher Summers, Peter Kilgore, Scott McElravy and Michael Bailey approving and Carlton Sprague opposing. The measure passed against the advice of the town's attorney, Philip Saucier of Bernstein Shur. Saucier advised them that the only way to remove a school board member from office requires an

authorization by charter.

Although it is not clear whether a town can legally recall officials elected to serve in a non-municipal capacity selectmen accepted the petitions, which laid the groundwork for a special recall election to be held on Jan. 10. Lester resigned from the board on Dec. 4. Otterson has pledged to continue serving until the matter is resolved.

Lester's replacement was appointed by selectmen on Dec. 12: Troy Ripley, a former school board director who was defeated by Lester in 2021 when they faced off in Paris' local elections.

Ripley and Paris resident Christie Wessels both filed applications for the appointment and attended the Dec. 12 meeting.

Ripley did not speak during the meeting except to confirm he had previously served on the board.

"I don't have too much to say," Wessels told selectmen when asked why she sought the appointment. "I'm happy to see Troy fill the position ... it doesn't really matter to me. I just wanted to let you know I am available if you decide to go that way."

Chair Christopher Summers, Carlton Sprague, Scott McElravy and Michael Bailey all voted to appoint Ripley to Lester's vacated seat. Peter Kilgore was not present.

"I'd like to choose Troy Ripley," said McElravy in making the motion to fill the seat. "I know Mr. Ripley and he has a conservative view on most things which I'd appreciate. And he has experience working with the quagmire known as SAD 17 school board. So I would vote for Troy as replacement. He's been in the swamp before."

Ripley will fill the director seat until its term expires in June of 2023. "I look forward to working with the other board members for the interim," Ripley said in an email statement to the Advertiser Democrat. "I believe any interim appointments that are made should be with individuals who have prior Board experience as the district faces many challenges, such as a new superintendent search and the construction of two new schools." He added that he has not made any decision whether to pursue the post in the next local election.

In Cordwell's resignation letter she wrote she was disturbed that voters would be willing to remove two dedicated school board members without giving the board consideration to draft a policy that will protect both students and parents. She also cited an environment where some board members act in an intimidating manner towards others, to the detriment of the district's students.



SAD 17's former superintendent Dr. Monica Henson (right) has a private word with School Board Director Robert Jewell of Paris on Jan. 18, after the Oxford Hills Educators Association informed the board its members had overwhelmingly supported a vote of no confidence against Henson and outlined a list of 27 complaints about her actions and conduct during the first half of the 2021-22 academic school year. With multiple investigations against her, Henson resigned from her position on April 4. *Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat*

Cordwell's comments about board conduct are reminiscent of a period in 2021 when some former directors felt railroaded into supporting the hire of former district Superintendent Monica Henson. Henson resigned after nine chaotic months that included allegations she abused a student at the start of the 2021-22 school year, intimidated staff to cover it up and was given a vote of no confidence by district educators in January of this year. After first being suspended by the school board, Henson resigned from her position and left Maine last April.

The town of Oxford is taking a more measured and cautious approach to appointing Cordwell's replacement. According to Town Manager Adam Garland, two residents have filed committee applications for the vacant seat, Gay DeHart and Becky Mason. Garland explained to the Advertiser Democrat Monday that he expects Oxford selectmen will invite the two candidates to speak at a meeting in January.

Andrews wrote in her resignation letter to the board the commitments required have become too difficult to manage as she applies herself to her new position in Bethel. She said she will continue as West Paris director until her term expires and can be filled at that town's next annual town meeting. She pledged to help and support her colleagues and friends as the board transitions to new leadership.

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