

FEATURED

Petition about safety presented to Hopkins School Board

Natalie Cierzan Jun 14, 2024 0



Emily Ward, who currently has two Hopkins in the district, tells the Hopkins School Board that she is "underwhelmed" by the district's response and lack of communication regarding the alleged assault on transgender student Cobalt Sovereign on May 30 at the June 11 School Board Meeting.

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Signatures include parents of Cobalt Sovereign, victim of alleged assault at Hopkins High

More than 230 signatures on a petition looking for improved safety, security and anti-bullying measures in Hopkins Public Schools greeted the Hopkins School Board at their final meeting of the school year on June 11. Among those signatures include Ashley Sovereign and Mark Walztoni, the parents of Hopkins transgender student Cobalt Sovereign, the victim of an alleged assault at Hopkins High on May 30 and the reason behind a rally that brought a couple hundred people out to school grounds on June 5.

The petition, addressed to Hopkins Superintendent Rhoda Mhiripiri-Reed and the Hopkins School Board, highlights concerns for Sovereign's alleged assault alongside other alleged incidents.

"Just two days prior, there were three fights at the high school and the police were called to prevent a fourth. Culture Night was subsequently canceled after threats of violence surfaced. These incidents are part of a broader pattern and highlight the urgent need for improved safety and enforcement of anti-bullying measures in Hopkins Public Schools," the petition read.

One of the potential reasons for the increase in violence, the petition suggested, is due to the non-renewal of the school's student resource office (SRO) contract with the Minnetonka Police Department in 2020. The petition also suggested the product of that decision has caused "a significant weakening of behavior management practices and a disturbing lack of appropriate consequences for student misconduct" and "a lack of formal partnership with the Minnetonka Police has left a significant gap in our school's holistic safety plan."

The petition goes on to list seven "critical issues" community members would like the school administration and board to address which include:

- Employ a full range of behavior management techniques beyond restorative conversations.
- Implement swift and appropriate consequences for students involved in serious misconduct.
- Develop an official communication strategy for incidents which would establish and develop a clear decision tree outlined when and how the school will inform parents and caregivers about incidents.
- Re-establish the SRO partnership.
- Increase the frequency of safety and security committee meetings, moving from annually back to monthly.
- Involve local law enforcement in safety and security committee meetings.
- Integrate local law enforcement in school safety drills.

"By implementing these measures, Hopkins Public Schools can create a safer and more supportive environment for all students. Our children's welfare is paramount, and district leadership must take decisive action to protect them," the petition concluded.

Board meeting

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Ashley Ashbeck, a Hopkins parent, a member of the Hopkins School Alliance and the first name listed on the petition, presents a petition with more than 230 signatures from community members asking the district for changes to their conduct in a way that aims to improve safety, security and anti-bullying measures, at the June 11 School Board Meeting.

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Ashley Ashbeck, a Hopkins parent, a member of the Hopkins School Alliance and the first name listed on the petition, presented the petition during the last public comment period. She was among others who voiced their concerns regarding school safety, some who also signed the petition and others who did not. She also mentioned a statistic regarding the more than 2,200 Hopkins students who open-enrolled elsewhere last school year.

“News headlines about the violence in our schools will certainly accelerate the exodus. All children in our district deserve to feel safe at school. We ask for immediate action to secure a secure and supportive learning environment,” she said.

Two voicemails and six public comments were provided about safety in Hopkins’ schools or the alleged attack on Sovereign. A voicemail from Dallas Downey, a Hopkins junior and president of the Hopkins Black Student Alliance (BSA), said there was another untold side of the story regarding the incident involving Sovereign and three other students.

“What the news outlets failed to include is the unshared story of the other scholar who witnessed the incident. Only one side of this narrative has been told. This leaves many questions and concerns for BSA as there are negative narratives and stereotypes being perpetuated on the other scholar. While some information remains unknown and can’t be shared due to this being an open investigation, these allegations of racial harm happening in this event are there because of the use of slurs,” Downey said.

He asked for the lack of both sides of the story being told to be addressed and voiced concerns about the criminalization of the other student and the calls from many parents asking the school to expel him.

“The consequences of criminalization are profound, leading to increased rates of suspension, expulsion and involvement in the juvenile justice system. Many parents are calling for the expulsion of the Black student, perpetuating this system of injustice. We also see many parents requesting SROs back in schools. In many places, they cause more harm to scholars of color than good. Is this what we want?” Downey said.

Downey and the BSA were not the only ones against the petition’s call for bringing back an SRO. Quinn Portilla, a mother of two future Hopkins High students, was not in support of bringing back an SRO.

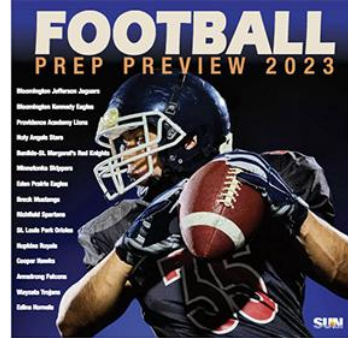
“The incidents that took place on May 30, really the physical and emotional harm that was perpetuated and that affected multiple individuals and communities. I am not so sure. I don’t know that I feel safe sending my kid to school. ... What is currently in place is not sufficient, that should be on record, that in my opinion, that there needs to be some sort of middle ground,” she said.



Eric Mandel, a parent of two Hopkins students, tells the Hopkins School Board that both the board and administration have “completely failed in its fundamental duty to provide a safe learning environment for our children” at the June 11 School Board Meeting.

Natalie Cierzan

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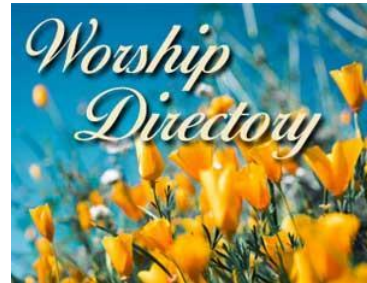
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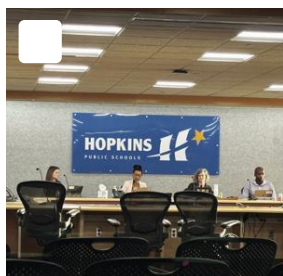
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Other members of the Hopkins School Alliance spoke, including Bob Fallen, who chose to speak after watching the board debate during their work session over whether or not to include school safety and security as a new item on the agenda.

“Specifically, I recall several members who ran for the board talking about the need for greater transparency and what we’re seeing is exactly the opposite. To every member of the school board and administration, do yourself a favor. Watch the video of tonight’s working session and the board meeting. Watch your body language. Listen to the cringe conversation deflecting any accountability for the people paid to operate our schools effectively and safely. Your collective response says it all about your aversion to addressing this subject in front of the constituents you swore an oath to serve,” he said.

During the work session, School Board Member Jen Westmoreland and Superintendent Rhoda Mhiripiri-Reed warned the audience that details regarding the matter would be limited due to an ongoing investigation and the involvement of minors. Eventually, the item was added, and would precede the ability for anyone in the room to speak during the public comment period. Hopkins School Board Member Kaj Thompson suggested re-opening the first public comment period reserved for items on the agenda due to the new addition, but the rest of the board did not find it necessary. Instead, everyone there to speak on the item had to wait until the end.



Hopkins
Superintendent Rhoda
Mhiripiri-Reed presents on school
safety and security at the June 11
School Board Meeting.
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Superintendent statement

“During my superintendent board report, I mentioned that as a community and as adults in our community, we really have to equip ourselves with simultaneously holding and recognizing all of the wonderful things that happen in our schools every single day while also acknowledging challenges and events that do interfere with high-quality teaching and learning, and interfere with students feeling safe while at school. I feel terrible that one of our transgender students was severely injured.

I want to acknowledge that members of our high school student body have been impacted by what is a layered and complex scenario related to this incident,” she said.

She also highlighted a “large group fight” also mentioned in the petition, which was recorded and viewed by many students and families.

“When things like this happen, when students are not or unable to meet our expectations, and if they are injured in the process, then it really is an interruption, it’s a disruption to what we’re really all working hard to accomplish for our students and for their futures,” Mhiripiri-Reed.

Again, she said she could not comment on the incident due to minors being involved. The district hired an independent investigator to look into the incident. Mhiripiri-Reed acknowledged the amount of concerning messages sent to the administration and the board regarding the incident from all kinds of community members. She said it was important for the community to understand how the district creates conditions for students to show up as their “true authentic self” and also addresses holistic safety.

Mhiripiri-Reed provided a presentation on the current state of Hopkins Public School’s safety and “the desired state.” Some current efforts included the

district being twice weekly, school safety teams and engaging in restorative discipline practices. She said some community members may have misconceptions about what restorative practices mean, and it did not mean students are not being held accountable.

“I’m actually saddened to share with our community that this year at our high school alone, we have suspended 102 students. Right? Some people think we’re not suspending kids at all, they can just fight and be in school that day or the next day. No, no. We are suspending and we are over-suspending. We need to figure out how we can work differently and more thoughtfully to infuse restorative practices in our discipline measures so that we are not over-suspending and we are not disproportionately suspending our Black and brown students, which does reflect what’s happening nationwide,” she said.

Mhiripiri-Reed emphasized, “We are not in the practice of calling the police to come to our schools and arrest our students. We are in the practice of having trained administrators, paras, social workers, safety coaches and others work as best as they can when there are disruptions. If they are unable to do that, then we will partner with law enforcement.”



The current state of safety and security conditions at Hopkins Schools, according to a presentation slide put together by Superintendent Rhoda Mhiripiri-Reed at a Hopkins School Board meeting on June 11.

Submitted photo

Meanwhile, some desired items she highlighted included installing new physical safety measures in schools, such as better cameras and vape



The desired state of safety and security conditions at Hopkins Schools, according to a presentation slide put together by Hopkins Superintendent Rhoda Mhiripiri-Reed at a Hopkins School Board meeting on June 11.

Submitted photo

detection, which was approved earlier in the meeting; launching an “exploratory team” to look at issues like school safety; providing safety and security training in August; requiring staff to engage in equity training and increasing crisis prevention intervention training; as well as reducing incidents and suspensions.

“We do have a lot of work to do. One thing that we’re really eager for is working with parents and our community members. We know that you may have some ideas that we haven’t thought of. I do think, honestly, that during those two years of Covid when students were out of school for so long and really were detrimentally impacted by not being in predictable and routine-based school environments, they kind of fell out of that social practice.” She said.

Mhiripiri-Reed also addressed the request from some Hopkins community members to bring back an SRO.

“That is something that we’re not going to do without a very thoughtful community engagement effort. That is a community-wide decision and we have to involve our students and their perspectives, their feelings of safety and there’s also a lot of research around okay, what are the pros and what are the concerns of having an SRO in our high school,” she said.

To view the full school board meeting, visit [youtube.com/watch?v=qrHDHZadxw0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrHDHZadxw0).

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