

**ELECTIONS**

# Parents 'have wept.' What Cincinnati school board race results mean for culture wars

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**Key Points** AI-assisted summary ⓘ

More than half of the Greater Cincinnati school board candidates endorsed by conservative group Ohio Value Voters won in the Nov. 4 general election.

Ohio Value Voters is described by a nonpartisan nonprofit as an extremist group. Its mission involves "protecting faith, family, freedom and the sanctity of life."

The election results have led to concerns from some parents about politically charged school board meetings and possible staff resignations.

It appears the culture wars that have [struck suburban districts across Greater Cincinnati](#) in recent years are far from over.

More than half of the local school board candidates endorsed by [Ohio Value Voters](#) snagged wins in [the Nov. 4 general election](#). Ohio Value Voters is a group that [describes its](#) mission as "protecting faith, family, freedom and the sanctity of life." The group is 501 (c)(4) nonprofit that is not required to report its donors.

Among the endorsed candidates who won a school board seat was an 18-year-old Lakota graduate who [staunchly opposed the district's historically large tax levy](#), a parent [running to "make schools great again"](#) and a pair of ["true conservatives"](#) who championed the end of "woke culture."

According to its website, Ohio Value Voters facilitates the [Protect Ohio Children Coalition](#), which collects mostly anonymous tips that Ohio schools are indoctrinating kids on [diversity, equity and inclusion programming](#), comprehensive [sex education](#) and [social and emotional learning](#).

The group was also a force [against critical race theory](#) in schools when that became a hot topic in 2022.

In total, [Ohio Value Voters endorsed](#) 16 school board candidates across Hamilton, Butler, Warren and Clermont counties. Nine claimed victories in their local school board races.

Ohio Value Voters did not respond to phone calls and voicemails from The Enquirer.

## **How will Ohio Value Voters impact newly elected board members?**

It is unclear how the group's endorsements will affect individual local board of education seat winners.

In Butler County, Ben Nguyen, Lakota's 18-year-old board member-elect, earned an endorsement from the group. He said he doesn't anticipate his conservative values will have much of an effect on the happenings of the new Lakota school board.

"I'd be shocked if abortion pops up at a school board meeting," Nguyen said, adding that it'd be inappropriate if that topic or other issues like immigration did emerge in that capacity.

"I'm just focused on how we can be a better district ... (and) bipartisan endeavors that we're all going to work toward," he said.

Dan Smith, a Little Miami school board candidate endorsed by the group, declined to talk with The Enquirer about the endorsement as he needs "more time to digest what's happened" in the days after the election.

Smith, who won in the suburban district's school board race, said he can't speak on "specific questions on certain issues" addressed by Ohio Value Voters and other conservative groups.

## **Which Cincinnati-area school board members were endorsed by alleged extremist group?**

The following candidates elected to their local school board Nov. 4 were endorsed by Ohio Value Voters.

## **What election results mean for suburban districts: 'Parents have wept'**

This election's wave of conservative board members means more politically charged school board meetings for Little Miami parent Vanessa Srikantham.

Having lived in the district since 2019, Srikantham has seen the district through a series of culture war disputes, like the controversy around a book about a gay student that caused the district to "pause" book fairs and the proposed policy that would have required teachers to take down displays not directly related to their class curriculum, like LGBTQ+ pride flags.

She created the [Together for Little Miami PAC](#) this year to help get the district back on track.

The chaos, she said, has been largely shepherded by current board member David Wallace, who was also [endorsed by Ohio Value Voters](#) when he last ran in 2023. And the arrival of Smith and Mandy Bullock to the board could mean more fuel for Wallace, she said.

"I will tell you that the community spoke loud and clear as to the direction of the school and we're definitely going to carry out the will of the voters," Wallace said about the Nov. 4 election results. "I'm excited about this new board."

Srikantham was personally sued for defamation by Wallace in April this year, [court records show](#). The case originated from an exchange in a board meeting wherein Srikantham claimed Wallace participated in online vitriol against her for "peddling inappropriate books to children," she said.

Wallace also has a civil complaint case open against the district, Superintendent Regina Morgan and several fellow board members for a different dispute related to his character.

Campaign materials from Smith and Bullock that mention the "end of DEI and woke culture in Little Miami" have amped up the tension felt by some parents, Srikantham said. But others are hopeful this new school board will have "more decorum" in meetings.

"I've talked to parents who have wept and are nervous and talking about pulling their kids and going to private (schools)," Srikantham said. "I've talked to staff members who mentioned resigning or finding employment elsewhere because of the talk of trying to remove books."

## **Culture wars divide Warren County Republicans**

Little Miami's neighbor to the north, Lebanon schools, also saw a win from Ohio Value Voters-endorsed Jennifer Daulton, a current board member who secured two more years in an unexpired term race. The [self-described "conservative Republican"](#) board member had a relatively narrow win, with 55% votes against retired teacher Esther Larson, who earned 45% of the vote.

Daulton joins the more moderate, GOP-endorsed incumbents Roy MacCutcheon and Michael Gliatti, who claimed the two full-term seats in the Nov. 4 election.

This election cycle proved "dirtier" than the rest within the county's Republican Party, said MacCutcheon, a 45-year resident of the Lebanon district.

"We have a unique situation in Warren County and Lebanon because there is a very small group of people that have virtually created their own Republican Party," he said, referring to candidates like Daulton, endorsed by Columbus-based groups Ohio Value Voters and [Ohio Conservatives PAC](#).

MacCutcheon said this new sect of Republicans resorted to "misleading campaign tactics" this election cycle like obstructing his campaign signs at polling locations with camping chairs.

He also said volunteers were misleading voters at polling locations by handing out Ohio Conservatives PAC-funded slate cards endorsing "Conservative Republicans." The cards listed only Daulton and fellow school board candidate Danielle Schultz, who lost to MacCutcheon and Gliatti in the general board election.

"They do not support other Republican candidates," he said. "It's unbelievable what they will do to get one or two people elected."

The party's chairman did not respond to The Enquirer's request for an interview.

The discourse in Lebanon reflects greater debate among parents and teachers on both sides of the aisle who want to leave politics out of education.

"As a parent, I want to make sure our schools remain safe and supportive," Lebanon parent Ashley Capuana told The Enquirer after Election Day. "I encourage the reelected board to ... keep education at the center of every decision."

## **Other districts opt to 'make school board meetings boring again'**

In other suburban districts with turbulent school board histories, the election results redirected the course toward a calmer climate.

With the departure of the ["Four For Forest Hills" board members](#) who led the crusade against critical race theory and voted to [ban a high school's diversity day](#),

the Hamilton County district saw the victories of more tame school board candidates this election cycle.

In fact, "making school board meetings boring again" [was a popular mantra](#) echoed in the district. Board member-to-be Jeff Nye, who earned the second-most votes in his race, made that clear in his [Enquirer candidate questionnaire](#).

"We need to fill the leadership vacuum at the top of the district and put the focus back on education and student wellness, not on politics or imagined grievances, and make sure that kids know that all students are welcome in Forest Hills," Nye said. "We need to rebuild the relationship between the board and the community by being accessible, accountable, and communicative."