

## Rancor Where Private-School Parents Make Public-School Decisions

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If you wanted to help a Martian understand this sliver of the planet in Rockland County, you might do two things. First, you would take him (or her or it) to the cavernous Foodmart International on the main drag, Route 59. The shoppers chatter in the broad, chilly aisles in every language under the sun. The wares include Cuban bread, Thai jasmine rice, Vietnamese chili-garlic sauce, Chinese kidney and liver herb extract, Haitian sugar, Salvadoran pickled vegetables, Honduran cream, Malaysian papaya pudding — like the provisions for some modern ark. Then, you would head a mile or so down the road toward Monsey, where you would see gaggles of observant Jews in traditional garb walking on the street, pushing strollers, popping into shops offering kosher pizza, falafel and ice cream.

This would be helpful in understanding not just this area, but disputes along sensitive cultural fault lines that are playing out in several suburban communities. In fact, the East Ramapo school district here is going through the same drama as the district in Lawrence, on Long Island.

In both cases, the boards voted to close one of the local schools. In both cases, one reason given is declining enrollments because so many local families now send their children to yeshivas. In both cases, the decision was made by boards dominated by Orthodox Jews who are running the public schools but don't send their own children to them.

Many of the Orthodox here and elsewhere feel crushed by the weight of high school taxes and private school tuition. Making sure the school district is fiscally prudent seems a necessity. Nathan Rothschild, the president of the East Ramapo board, said its record demonstrated a clear commitment to provide a quality education, not just to carefully manage costs.

He said this was still a democracy, where whoever gets the most votes gets to serve.

"I take great offense to the idea that you can tell a specific part of the community, 'You're not entitled to run for office,'" he said. "That's outrageous."

But increasingly, others are chafing at the idea that people who don't send their children to the public schools are making the decisions for those from very different cultures who do.

Steve White, a parent who is partly of Jewish descent, speaks fluent Creole and is married to Emilia White, a Haitian-American, has put together a slate of candidates for the three seats on the ballot in the May 19 school board elections. One is his wife, the second is Hispanic and the third is an Irish-American candidate who replaced an African-American who dropped out for health reasons. People wonder, he said, where the justice is in a public school district that's overwhelmingly Haitian, African-American and Hispanic being run by what Mr. Rothschild calls "the private school community." And, Mr. White added, in an area where the Orthodox have most of the economic clout and control the local health care center as well, the situation is a breeding ground for resentment. "The current system doesn't address the question of governance with the consent of the governed," he said, adding, "It doesn't feel like America."

The issue has percolated since the Orthodox gained control of the board a few years back. It gained a measure of acrimony a year ago when two Orthodox school board candidates dropped out of the race a week before the election, in effect giving their seats to two other Orthodox candidates, one of whom never campaigned, never supplied information for a candidate questionnaire and never showed up at candidates' forums.

It went into overdrive this year with the decision to close one of the schools, a decision that critics said played out more in private than at public meetings. Mr. Rothschild said the process was open and the decision was based on disrupting as few families as possible.

Mr. White said that recently announced plans for new housing and the growing number of Hispanic families with many children made it unclear whether a school closing made sense. And he said the composition of the board gave the appearance the decision was being influenced by the opportunity to turn the site into another yeshiva.

The enduring dynamic here and elsewhere is the Orthodox voting in huge numbers and, invariably, for one of their own. Competing here with splintered, low-income, ethnic constituencies, they invariably get the votes.

Of course, not all victories are worth the costs. And critics ask how the yeshiva parents in Ramapo would feel if the decisions about its schools were dictated by local black or Hispanic residents.

Memo to the Martian: Yeah, we live together, sort of. But it's a lot more complicated than it might seem down here. Watch your back.