

Dear Residents of Grundy County,

After much thought and prayer, I am submitting my resignation from the Grundy County School Board, effective immediately. Serving on this board has been a privilege, and I have always sought to make decisions rooted in principle, responsibility, and what I believed to be in the best interest of our students and schools.

From the beginning, I promised myself I would never be a “yes man.” I would never cast a vote for convenience, popularity, or pressure, but only for what I believed was right. That commitment has come at a personal cost to my family and me, but I would not change it.

One matter that has been widely discussed is my vote on the Education Freedom Act teacher bonus. While many saw this as “free money,” I could not in good conscience support legislation tied to measures I felt were harmful to public education. I recognize that my vote was unpopular, but it was not made out of malice, resentment, or grudges against any person. In fact, I come from a family of educators and hold the highest respect for our teachers. Many educators privately expressed their support for my decision, though they did not feel comfortable speaking publicly. I also received messages of encouragement from school board members in other Tennessee counties who praised me for standing on principle, even though they admitted they were afraid to take the same stand themselves.

Another point of contention was my vote to reinstate a separate maintenance supervisor position. My reasoning was simple: for years, our director of schools has carried both the director and maintenance roles. While he has performed admirably, this arrangement left the county at risk. At one point, he interviewed in another county. Had he left, Grundy County would have been without both a director of schools and a maintenance supervisor at the same time. My vote was intended to prevent that situation and ensure stability for our school system. It was not a slight against the director, with whom I have built a positive working relationship, but a business-minded decision for the long-term health of our schools.

Unfortunately, the county commission chose to reject the entire budget based on this single line item without ever reaching out to me for explanation. Had they asked, I would have gladly shared my reasoning. Instead, the matter became a point of contention and division. To make matters worse, some educators circulated claims on social media that this was deliberate to cause the budget to fail. They suggested that the board was trying to take away a pay increase that teachers were receiving. That was simply not true. The board had already approved a pay increase — originally required to bring new teacher salaries up to state minimums — but we extended that increase to every educator across the board. That decision had already been made and was not in jeopardy. My vote on the maintenance supervisor had nothing to do with teacher pay. It was about

protecting the county from administrative instability, not undermining educators or their compensation.

I have endured cyberbullying and harassment, much of it openly on Facebook, from educators and even fellow board members. My family has been targeted, and my children have been subjected to hostility no child should face. However, let me be clear: I am not resigning because of threats. I am resigning because the current board does not foster an environment where differing viewpoints are respected. Effective leadership requires listening, collaboration, and thoughtful debate, but that is not what I have experienced. Some board members admit that we don't discuss issues enough, while others refuse to discuss anything unless it is their own idea. If you disagree with them, you are immediately talked over and not allowed to finish a thought. That is not how a school board should operate, and I cannot continue to serve at a table where open and respectful dialogue is not valued.

I want to be clear: my decisions were never about one man, one office, or one vote. They were about protecting our schools, doing what I believed was right, and serving with integrity.

I step away with gratitude for the opportunity to serve, respect for those who dedicate their lives to educating our children, and hope that Grundy County will continue to pursue what is best for students above all else.

Respectfully,

Eric Birdwell