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Island teachers speak out on 'inappropriate' turnover

Educators urge school board members to reconsider recent personnel decisions April 18, 2026

BY JACK BEAUDOIN



DEER ISLE—CSD 13 School Board members got an earful from teachers from both the elementary and high schools following what teachers union president Jenn Mayo characterized as a round of "teacher layoffs and resignations."

Mayo, a math teacher at Deer Isle-Stonington High School with more than two decades of experience, was the first of four speakers who criticized the personnel decisions during the board's public comment period at its April 13 meeting.

"They affect real people, dedicated professionals, who chose to work here," Mayo said of the decisions. "We are losing teachers who want to be here and who have already proven their value in the classroom." Mayo pointed out that just two years ago, the island schools were unable to open as scheduled because the administration had been unable to fill all the vacant positions. Letting go of new teachers on probationary contracts, she said, could reduce stability and introduce challenges in filling newly open teacher, educational technician and staff positions.



Jenn Mayo speaks out about staff layoffs/resignations at the CSD 13 School Board meeting. BY JACK BEAUDOIN

The scope of the turnover was unclear. The agenda and supporting materials accessible to the public made no specific mention of layoffs, but chair Genevieve McDonald read off a list of at least six school district employees who recently had tendered resignations, including Torrie Pratt, Mary Witte, Hayley Landes, Jessica Sieber Grasso, Betsy Woodward and Christina Brewer.

In an interview following the meeting, Mayo characterized the resignations as "forced withdrawals." She said the affected teachers, ed techs and staff were notified—only via email delivered the morning of the meeting—that their positions would not be renewed, and were given the opportunity to resign. Because they were still on probationary contracts, no reasons were required.

Mayo said she sent an email to members of the teachers union asking them to support their colleagues at the school board meeting.

"I don't know that the approach was unusual," she said. "I would say it was inappropriate. Not thoughtful. Inconsiderate."

District response

Following the board's standard practice, McDonald and her colleagues did not respond to the comments directly. Given the nature of the issue—personnel decisions—it's likely any discussion by the board would have to take place behind closed doors in executive session. McDonald did however provide a written statement to the Ad-Vantages after the April 13 meeting. Her statement, on behalf of the board, follows in full:

"The School Board's responsibility is first and foremost to our students. It is the Board's preference that all teachers on long-term continuing contracts hold at minimum a bachelor's degree, and ideally, are certified to teach in their subjects.

"In recent years, in response to workforce challenges, the law was updated to expand pathways allowing individuals to teach under conditional licensure while working toward full certification. Our schools have a two-year probationary period before teachers advance to long-term contracts. This provides an opportunity for teachers to continue their education and develop the skills necessary for effective classroom instruction and management.

"Many of the teachers we have hired under this framework have become valuable members of our long-term teaching staff. In cases where teachers do not continue beyond the probationary period, those decisions are made with careful and deliberate consideration with a clear focus on what is best for our students. This is a challenging process, but an essential step in ensuring our schools provide the best possible education for our students."

In a separate written statement, CSD 13 Superintendent Tara McKechnie said, "The narrative that our district is struggling to hire or retain educators does not reflect the reality. This is a district building momentum, expanding career pathways such as a new island carpentry and apprenticeship program, strengthening athletics and the arts, improving college and career readiness, enhancing after school opportunities, and investing in facilities and nutrition programs."

Common themes

In her public comments, Mayo appealed to the board to reverse the layoff/resignations. "I urge the board to take a step back," she said. "Our teachers are not expendable. They are essential."

Mayo's comments, like those that followed, received loud applause from the three dozen members of the public who attended the meeting.

The next speaker was Stonington Select Board Member Donna Brewer, who called the situation a "toxic" environment. "I have serious concerns with the direction you've taken with the elementary and junior high school [classes]," said Brewer, who argued that the personnel changes and related decisions are undermining parental confidence in the schools and reducing enrollment. "If this continues, there will be no reason to keep the schools open."

Parent and special education teacher Jenny Leaf spoke next. She said in the seven years her children have been in the CSD 13 schools, "we have cycled through superintendents, principals, curricula and consultants, yet these 'big fixes' have failed to yield measurable improvement.

"I have watched too many talented administrators, teachers and ed techs leave because they did not feel supported," Leaf continued. "When we lose people who have deep ties to our community, we lose the backbone of our schools."

Leaf noted that the school district already faces challenges in teacher recruitment: the lack of competitive salaries and affordable housing makes it difficult to attract qualified applicants. "Our greatest asset is the dedicated group of educators and support staff who have already committed to this community," she told the board. "We must go out of our way to ensure our teachers feel valued....Watching our team walk away due to a lack of support is a heartbreak we can no longer afford."

Those sentiments were echoed by Jason Whiteman, a third grade teacher who has held several positions at the schools under various principals and superintendents. Drawing on conversations in school hallways, basketball courts and soccer fields, he said employees felt unsupported, unheard and unable to speak up. The elementary school in particular, he added, "has become a very difficult place to work."

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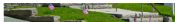
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