

Black Lives Matter, She Wrote. Then ‘Everything Just Imploded.’

A Black superintendent’s email to parents after the killing of George Floyd engulfed a small, predominantly white Maryland community in a yearlong firestorm.



Andrea Kane on her last day as superintendent of schools in Queen Anne’s County, Md.

By Erica L. Green

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CENTREVILLE, Md. — When Andrea Kane sat down to write a letter to parents in her school district days after George Floyd’s death in 2020, images of the Black man pleading for his life under the knee of a white Minnesota police officer were haunting her.

Dr. Kane, the superintendent, saw him in the faces of Black students in her district and heard him crying out for his mother when she spoke to her own sons. So she started her letter with a warning that it would bear not just “good news,” but “a bit of a reality check.”

Despite the coronavirus pandemic, the high-performing district on the Eastern Shore of Maryland had closed out the year with much to be proud of. But like the rest of the country, Dr. Kane said, the community had another crisis to confront.

“Racism is alive in our country, our state, in Queen Anne’s County, and our schools,” she wrote in the letter, emailed to the parents of all 7,700 students in the district.

Her statement mirrored hundreds that superintendents across the country had issued in the wake of Mr. Floyd’s death and the mass protests that followed. Many of the educators took the opportunity to renew their commitment to racial justice in their schools.

But the message from Dr. Kane, the first Black superintendent of Queen Anne’s County Public Schools, would engulf the small, predominantly white community tucked along the Chesapeake Bay in a yearlong firestorm.

“When I hit send,” Dr. Kane recalled recently, “everything just imploded.”

Over the last year, the protests and reflection prompted by Mr. Floyd’s death reverberated in school districts throughout the country, as school boards and legislatures reconsidered how and what students should learn about race and racism, from the history of slavery and segregation to the Black Lives Matter movement.



A protest in Virginia against “critical race theory,” a term often used to attack any discussion of race and racism in class. The debate pits educators who feel obligated to teach about racism against mostly white parents and politicians.

The debate has sometimes focused on K-12 curriculums after conservative activists began branding a range of topics including history lessons and diversity initiatives as “critical race theory,” an academic framework that views racism as ingrained in law and other modern institutions. The term is now often deployed to attack any discussion of race and racism in American classrooms — pitting educators who feel obligated to teach the realities of racism against predominantly white parents and politicians who believe that schools are forcing white children to feel ashamed of their race and country.

Superintendents are feeling the brunt of the backlash. Some have been threatened, harassed and fired over accusations they are seeking to “indoctrinate” children through books, history lessons and equity policies, said Daniel A. Domenech, president of the AASA, the School Superintendents Association, which represents nearly 14,000 district leaders across the country.

For Black educators in particular, the opposition has felt personal and poignant. Only 2 percent of the nation’s superintendents are Black, according to the AASA’s latest count, and many are expecting that number to shrink.

Michael D. McFarland, president of the National Alliance of Black School Educators, said that many African American school administrators are already unfairly branded as activists, and scrutinized for any perceived misstep.

Particularly in majority-white communities, Dr. McFarland said, “it’s harder for you to do the work that you were hired to do” as a superintendent, “let alone take stances on equity and social justice issues.”

“To take those stances comes at an enormous cost,” he added.

Dr. Kane thought long and hard about the cost of staying silent.

She knew the Black Lives Matter movement was divisive — even in the Black community — but it didn’t make the mantra any less true. She felt she would have been negligent in her role had she not addressed the images her students were seeing on television. “How could I not help them make sense of a Black body being destroyed in the street?” she said.

With all of this in mind, she agonized over every word of the letter she wrote on June 5, 2020.

“When I say ‘Black Lives Matter,’ it is not meant to disparage any other race,” she wrote. “It is an acknowledgment of the disparate brutality and overt racism that is only experienced by Black people in America, including me.”



Protests in June 2020 in Washington after the death of George Floyd. The same month, Dr. Kane emailed parents in her school district to offer “a bit of a reality check” about racism.

A Spark Spreads on Facebook

Dr. Kane’s inbox swelled in the days that followed, overwhelmingly with responses of gratitude and support. But a month later, an email appeared with the subject line “Urgent Attention Required.”

Dr. Kane recognized the name of the parent who had sent it: Gordana Schifanelli. A few weeks before, someone had alerted the superintendent to Kent Island Patriots, a new Facebook group that Ms. Schifanelli had created, its name a reference to a part of the county. Members of the group had been raging about her letter.

In a June 16 post to the group, according to a screenshot provided to The New York Times, Ms. Schifanelli declared: “Dr. Kane in QAC needs to end her contract and go! People in this group must call and make it loud and clear that the school must remain apolitical and her letter to parents promoting Black Lives Matter is not going to be tolerated.”

The post went on: “The children must know that those individuals who died in police custody were criminals — not heroes! Our children will not be indoctrinated by anyone’s political opinion in the school and our children must NEVER feel that their white skin color make them guilty of slavery or racism!”

By the time Ms. Schifanelli wrote directly to Dr. Kane on July 6, the Facebook group had grown to 2,000 members.

In her letter, Ms. Schifanelli said she had lost confidence in Dr. Kane's ability to lead the district. Describing herself as "an immigrant to this country," Ms. Schifanelli added, "I am a living example of the very American dream you managed to tarnish by your racist comments."

But Dr. Kane would not bend.



Appearing on "Fox & Friends" in April 2021, Gordana Schifanelli spoke about her Facebook group, the Kent Island Patriots, which seethed about Dr. Kane's email to parents.

Over nearly three years on the job, she had collected evidence of systemic and overt racism in the semirural, conservative county, where only 6 percent of the student body is Black. She knew that Black students regularly heard the N-word used in the county's schools, that they were underserved and overdisciplined.

Under her leadership, the district began breaking down data to scrutinize gaping achievement gaps between Black and white students. It also contracted with firms focused on equity work, including helping school staff build positive relationships within diverse student populations and increasing students' access to academic opportunities like advanced courses.

Tynay Wright, then a senior at Kent Island High School, was encouraged by the parts of Dr. Kane's end-of-school-year letter that praised "white and Black people for coming together in nonviolent protests" and that urged the community to "listen more and pass judgment less."

Ms. Wright asked for Dr. Kane's support after Mr. Floyd's death in organizing events that would bring the national reckoning to Queen Anne's County.

The superintendent attended a protest that Ms. Wright organized in early July. She also granted the young woman's request to invite a local organization called Students

Talking About Race, or STAR, to facilitate voluntary discussions over the summer. The group had been conducting similar events in neighboring counties.

Ms. Wright said Dr. Kane's support gave her an opportunity rarely afforded to Black students in Queen Anne's County: "I got to use my voice."

Through the rest of the summer, tensions escalated. The Kent Island Patriots, incensed by Dr. Kane's support of the events Ms. Wright had planned, circulated a petition to have Dr. Kane fired. A quasi-governmental community group called the Sunday Supper Committee — a predominantly white group of county residents that had been holding conversations about racism and equity since 2016 — created a petition in support of Dr. Kane.

"We very proudly stood behind her when she said Black Lives Matter, because that's something that we had believed in," Mary Ella Jourdak, a member of the Sunday Supper Committee, said of Dr. Kane. "And we thought it was important coming from a Black community leader."

In August, a rally in support of Dr. Kane drew more than 100 residents and supporters, including members of civil rights groups from across the state.

Dr. Kane thought the show of support would drown out the furor — until she saw more posts from the Kent Island Patriots Facebook group that summer. According to screen shots made public on social media, and others provided to The Times, commenters used the N-word. One post called Black people "animals." A meme mocked Black men who had been killed by the police with the words: "I caint breave." One commenter posted a picture of a cotton field with the words "Free BLM shirts. Some assembly required."

Ms. Schifanelli declined to be interviewed for this article. In an emailed statement, she said: "As an immigrant to this country who found love and peace among people of all races, backgrounds and beliefs, I found political activism in public schools abhorrent and contrary to the best interest of the children in my community, state and the entire nation."

Her lawyer and husband, Marc Schifanelli, sent a screenshot of a Facebook post in which Ms. Schifanelli said she was "horrified" by racist comments on the Kent Island Patriots page and threatened to remove the group members who wrote them.

Mr. Schifanelli also denied that Ms. Schifanelli's protests of Dr. Kane had anything to do with her race. In interviews with conservative media outlets, Ms. Schifanelli, who is a lawyer and an adjunct professor at the United States Naval Academy, has pointed to her experience growing up in Yugoslavia as a motivating force.

"I was one of those children who grew up in a communist country," she told the host of a conservative podcast, "and I had the communists coming to my high school and pulling me out of the classroom to join their Marxist organization, and I didn't want to go."

She said the Kent Island Patriots' movement was spreading to neighboring counties. "We just want common sense back, and we're taking our country back," she said.



Christine Betley, left, and Gina Crook, right, two Queen Anne's County teachers, and Mary Ella Jourdak, center, a resident of the county, were targeted for their support of Dr. Kane.

'Heartbreaking' Attacks by Parents

Christine Betley was among the first teachers in the district to speak up when she saw the growing discord in the community, sending a letter to the school board in support of Dr. Kane's efforts. She had moved to the county in 2019, and was blindsided by the hostility toward the superintendent.

Known as the passageway to Maryland's beaches, the county has a history steeped in the fishing and agriculture industries. It is one of the state's last conservative strongholds: More than 60 percent of its voters supported Donald J. Trump in the last two presidential elections. But the idyllic, laid-back life on the water has increasingly drawn progressives.

Ms. Betley said last summer was a “real eye-opener” to how “the depth of the disparity between white and Black and brown students was concealed in predominant culture.”

“I didn’t realize there was a structure that intended to keep it that way,” she added.

A Facebook group that Ms. Betley and other teachers had joined to communicate about the pandemic quickly became a platform for defending Dr. Kane’s support of the STAR discussions.

The teachers’ posts, which expressed alarm that maybe an outside white supremacist group had infiltrated the county, caught the attention of the Kent Island Patriots. On the group’s page, Ms. Schifanelli posted the teachers’ names and discussions, accusing them of supporting “political brainwashing of our children by using race.”

What followed — weeks of online harassment — was devastating for Gina Crook, a fifth-grade teacher. She was a Queen Anne’s County native, the daughter of a Chesapeake Bay waterman. She had attended the county’s schools and had become a popular educator, even a 2020 finalist for teacher of the year.

“I saw some of the names in the group, and thought, ‘There are people whose children I have loved and guided and given my best to on here attacking me,’” she said of the Kent Island Patriots. “It was just heartbreaking.”

By fall 2020, Ms. Schifanelli had been banned from Facebook. She sued both Ms. Jourdak and Ms. Betley, accusing them of defaming her in their support for Dr. Kane.

Around that time, Dr. Kane received word that the Patriots were planning a write-in campaign to take three of the five seats on the school board in November. Included in their slate of “Patriot candidates” was Marc Schifanelli, Ms. Schifanelli’s husband.

“That’s when I knew there was a long game,” Dr. Kane said, “one I didn’t want to play and could not win.”

A Superintendent With a Mission

Dr. Kane never dwelled much on being the county’s first Black superintendent. She did, however, worry about the possibility of being the last.

“I knew as a Black woman, it wasn’t enough to be good at my job,” she said. “I had to be excellent.”

Born and raised in West Baltimore, Dr. Kane, 56, had wanted to be a teacher ever since she served as a teacher’s assistant in Sunday school. But she wanted to make her parents proud by securing a job that paid as much as they had for her college education. She majored in economics and did well for herself as a bank manager but wanted to pursue what she loved. In 1996, she took a job as a substitute in the Anne Arundel County Public Schools, a district adjacent to Queen Anne’s, while she pursued her teaching certificate.



Dr. Kane in June as she prepared to leave her job a year after her email set off a fierce reaction that took a heavy toll. “They hung me out and stripped me bare,” she said of her critics.

Over the next couple of decades, Dr. Kane worked her way through the ranks of the school system, from teacher to principal to assistant superintendent, and earned her doctorate in 2016. She took the top job in Queen Anne’s County after spending several years as an associate superintendent in Richmond, Va. She, and the board that hired her, believed her track record overseeing hundreds of schools and raising achievement for students from all backgrounds had prepared her.

“I understood what some of the needs were, and one of them was that equity needed to be solidly introduced and carried through,” she said. “I went there because I felt like there was work for me to do.”

She knew the Eastern Shore’s history: It was where the abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman were born into slavery.

She also knew the district had struggled with racism in schools. Her predecessor, Gregory J. Pilewski, wrote to parents in May 2017 — just weeks before her arrival — about a string of what he called “racially motivated incidents.”

Dr. Pilewski outlined a series of efforts the district was taking to address race and equity issues, including contracting with cultural proficiency experts and hosting a series of “conversations on race” with the Sunday Supper Committee.

“I didn’t get any pushback,” Dr. Pilewski, who is white and is now a superintendent in Arkansas, said in an interview. “I got feedback from people saying, ‘It’s about time somebody started drawing attention to this.’”

Dr. Kane was never naïve enough to think her job would be easy. On the day she signed her contract in 2017, a white school board member refused to speak to her.

It was one of many hostile interactions she had with white board members during her tenure. In January, she filed an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaint against the Queen Anne's County school board detailing incidents dating back to 2018, saying she had been subjected to a hostile and discriminatory work environment.

In one instance, a former board president, a white woman, sent her a profane text message using the F-word when she asked to set up a time to go over paperwork, the complaint said. Months later, the same board member admitted to defacing a photograph of a Black teacher of the year in the district headquarters by drawing horns, a mustache and a goatee on it.

And last September, when Dr. Kane moved to fire a high-ranking central office administrator who was overheard on a voice mail message, obtained by The Times, repeating disparaging remarks about Black people, the board balked, the complaint said. The administrator was also heard discussing whether the board could buy out Dr. Kane's contract and replace her with another Black administrator to avoid criticism.

Richard A. Smith, who was appointed to an open seat on the school board in 2019 and is currently its president, declined to comment on the complaint, which also claimed that he and other board members failed to support her after her June 2020 letter.

In an interview, he said the board had not sought to "derail" Dr. Kane. He called her a "professional," and her race "irrelevant."



Centreville, the seat of Queen Anne's County, is one of Maryland's last conservative bastions. More than 60 percent of its voters chose Donald J. Trump for president in 2020.

But Mr. Smith, a Queen Anne's County native and local business owner, said he was offended by Dr. Kane's characterization of the county. He has devoted more than a

decade to public service, including a previous stint on the school board in the 1990s, and takes deep pride in his community — especially its school system, which attracts families from across the state and which his grandchildren attend. It has educated several generations of his family, starting with his grandparents, who graduated from high school there in the early 1900s; he recently attended his 50th high school reunion.

“We do not have a racist county,” Mr. Smith said. “We do not have a racist board.”



Richard A. Smith, now the president of the Queen Anne's County school board, at a meeting in January. “We do not have a racist county,” he said. “We do not have a racist board.”

He noted that the board issued a statement in August 2020 expressing support for Dr. Kane's efforts. But he also agreed with some of the criticism leveled against her.

He described what happened to Mr. Floyd as “appalling,” but said that he was also surprised by Dr. Kane's email. She was within her right to send it without the board's permission, he added, but the community was already on edge over school closures during the pandemic.

“I'm oriented to what's going on in the nation, but like a lot of people here, I care about Queen Anne's County,” Mr. Smith said. “I just don't know if it was the appropriate time to put that in, with everything else like Covid going on. It was very disruptive.”

‘They Made Me Feel Subhuman’

A few weeks into the 2020-21 school year, the controversy was taking its toll on Dr. Kane.

During a tense board meeting in October, in which the members sought to limit her authority to spend coronavirus relief funding, she walked out.

It was the first time many had seen the superintendent lose her composure. “I could tell at that moment that she had completely cut ties with the community,” recalled Ms. Crook, who was watching the meeting virtually. “And who could blame her?”

Two days later, Dr. Kane went on sick leave.

To this day, it is difficult for her to describe her mental and physical state at the time. Sleep eluded her, and she found herself looking over her shoulder at the gas station and the grocery store. Fearing for her safety, she moved out of the county.

She compares it to stepping outside her body, and back centuries to a time when the county’s residents sold enslaved people outside the courthouse.

“Talk about vulnerable — they made me feel subhuman,” she said of the board and the Kent Island Patriots. “They hung me out and stripped me bare.”

When she returned to work in December, the Patriots’ slate had won election and controlled the five-member school board. Mr. Schifanelli would be elected vice president.

At her first meeting with the new board, on Jan. 6, Dr. Kane delivered a fiery speech, proclaiming that her “resolve to fight racism in Queen Anne’s County Public Schools is stronger than ever.”

She announced that she had restored contracts the board had moved to dissolve in her absence, including one with the equity firm the district had hired to help close achievement gaps. The county schools, she said, would “once again engage in practices centered on diversity, equity and antiracism.”

It was seconds after she uttered three words in her remarks — Black Lives Matter — that Dr. Kane had her first public face-off with Mr. Schifanelli, who interrupted her.

“I’m willing to listen to your diatribe here,” he said, “but I do not like the fact that you’re bringing in a political organization into this public hearing, and I would ask you kindly to stop.”

“Thank you,” she said, and continued.

For many, it was a moment that demonstrated the power of Dr. Kane’s presence in the district.

Several Black natives of the county can describe in vivid terms how racism has touched every generation of their families. Many point to it as the reason that the Black population withered to 6.3 percent in 2010 from 26.9 percent in 1960.

“What we have pretty much taught most of our children is you do everything you can do to graduate and go elsewhere,” said Tory Brown, a Black Queen Anne’s County native, who is an instructional assistant in the school system, a community advocate and a supporter of Dr. Kane.

The first time Mr. Brown experienced racism in the Queen Anne's County school district was 25 years ago when he was in sixth grade, he said. He was called "a slave" and told to "go back to Africa." In 2006, his parents received a death threat and found a noose in their mailbox. Ten years later, his young niece was called the N-word as she walked down the street.

"For anybody to say there's no racism in Queen Anne's County, when I've been here and have experienced and seen it, just goes to show what we're dealing with," he said. "People had been suffering for years; we just never had anyone to speak up."



Tynay Wright, a former student, relied on Dr. Kane's support as she organized events and protests against racism. "It's not fair for little Black girls to see people like us come in and be so powerful, and see them taken away," Ms. Wright said. "It does something to us, mentally."

Ms. Wright, the student whose efforts Dr. Kane championed in the summer of 2020, vividly remembers when Dr. Kane, the first administrator with her complexion, walked into her class in ninth grade. It was as powerful a memory as when, as a

kindergartner, she was told by her white classmates that she couldn't play on a certain part of the playground "because she looked like Martin Luther King Jr."

"She made me feel like I could do anything," Ms. Wright said. "If her presence can move a room, and shake an atmosphere, imagine what her power could cause. I think they were scared of the change that was going to happen just from her being here."

The 'Patriot' Slate Takes Over

By this spring, Dr. Kane had announced she was leaving the district, and the search for a new superintendent was underway.

But Ms. Schifanelli took her message to Fox News, representing a point of view that was resonating across the country as a backlash against critical race theory ramped up.

"There is no systemic racism against anyone in our public schools, and we cannot make one up just because it is politically fashionable at the moment," she told the host.

Immediately after the appearance, hate mail began pouring into Dr. Kane's inbox from near and far.

"As long as there are woke Democrats such as yourself in our society, there will be racism," wrote a resident of Centreville, the county seat, who said his children attended local schools.

An all-caps email — traced by the sheriff's office to a 64-year-old white man from Kansas — used a racist slur against Dr. Kane.

And for the next several weeks, Dr. Kane watched as the Kent Island Patriots' platform began to transform policy.

At a board meeting in early May, Mr. Schifanelli proposed last-minute changes to an equity policy — the district was required to have one under state law — that had been in the works for two years.

He proposed to eliminate definitions such as "social identifiers," "cultural responsiveness" and "implicit bias," and to scrub the policy of words such as "systemic" and "institutional." In the same meeting, Mr. Schifanelli, an immigration lawyer, also garnered enough votes to remove a book from the middle school curriculum because it was sympathetic to a boy whose father faced deportation.

"They wanted to erase everything but the white experience," Dr. Kane said, "and that's what they did."

Mr. Smith supported the changes. He was one of the three candidates supported by the Kent Island Patriots, but maintained that he backed Mr. Schifanelli's measures based on his own beliefs.

“I don’t look at Black students or African American students any different than I look at Latinos, mixed race, Asians or whatever,” he said. “Everybody needs to be treated fairly and equally.”

Asked if he had ever talked to Black students about whether they were treated equally in school, he sighed. “Probably not as much as I could,” he said.



Dr. Kane at a farewell event on her last day. She is now a professor of practice at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, training the next generation of superintendents.

Tears and Thunder

One day in June, almost exactly a year after Dr. Kane had written the email, her voice rose above a rumble of thunder as she addressed a crowd outside the Kennard African American Cultural Heritage Center, named for Lucretia Kennard, the county’s first “supervisor of colored schools.”

One of the first events held at the center, which had educated the county’s Black students during segregation, had been to welcome Dr. Kane. On this day, she was saying goodbye.

“There’s some noise out there, and it’s an evil noise,” Dr. Kane told the group. “Give it some time; evil will consume itself. Any time we let children express who they are, and set examples for them about what is right, we can’t go wrong.”

Despite her challenges, the district had celebrated its first National Blue Ribbon school during her tenure, maintained its top ranking in graduation rates for two years and had offered its first African American studies course.

The event was billed as a celebration of her accomplishments but felt more like a funeral — with a program, prayers, dinner, tearful testimonies, gospel hymnals and an overwhelming sense of loss.

“It’s not fair for little Black girls to see people like us come in and be so powerful, and see them taken away — it does something to us, mentally,” said Ms. Wright, who recently started college at Lincoln University, a historically Black institution in Pennsylvania.

Ms. Betley was preparing to start a new job in the district: equity teacher specialist. “This whole thing has made my role even more important,” she said, “but on a personal level, I’m terrified.”

Over the summer, the board moved to reverse Dr. Kane’s actions. The administrator she had fired for making racist statements was rehired, and the watered-down equity policy passed unanimously.

This summer, Ms. Schifanelli spoke at events recounting her yearlong battle with Dr. Kane and her supporters. At an August rally for a Republican candidate in the Maryland governor’s race, she boasted about how the Kent Island Patriots’ school board write-in campaign “had 12,000 people standing strong against critical race theory in public schools.” Last month, that candidate, a Maryland state lawmaker, chose Ms. Schifanelli as his running mate. The following week, Facebook banned the Kent Island Patriots group, citing its standards on “dangerous individuals and organizations.”

Dr. Kane is now a professor of practice at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, training the next generation of superintendents.

As she prepared to leave the county’s central office for the last time in June, she held a vase of flowers in one arm and embraced her successor with the other. She told the new superintendent, a white woman the board hired from another Eastern Shore district, that she was a phone call away. Before walking out of the building, she adjusted the mask on her face, which was emblazoned with the words Black Lives Matter.

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