

[MUSIC PLAYING]

NINA MOINI: The Detroit Lakes school board has been trying to remove rainbow stickers from school grounds for months. It met again last night to debate a new policy. Our Harshawn Ratanpal was at the meeting and is here with us now to fill us in on what's been happening in Detroit Lakes. Hi, Harshawn.

**HARSHAWN
RATANPAL:**

Hi, Nina.

NINA MOINI: First of all, would you tell us, what are these rainbow stickers, what are they, and what is the big deal with them?

**HARSHAWN
RATANPAL:** Yeah. So these are small, 2 by 3 inch stickers that some teachers display on their doors or on their desks. They say the point is to indicate their inclusivity and to affirm that their classroom is a safe space for LGBTQ+ students. Those stickers have been up for about a decade, but this summer, four school board members surprised the community by voting to ban them.

But for months since then, there's been a lot of pushback, including legal problems. Two parents and the American Civil Liberties Union of Minnesota are suing the district over the ban, saying it violates students constitutional rights. In the meantime, the stickers have stayed up despite that ban in July.

NINA MOINI: OK, so the stickers are still up. There are legal issues, but I understand there's been a lot of back and forth in recent months. Can you fill us in?

**HARSHAWN
RATANPAL:** Right. So the board asked the district attorney to come up with some amendments to district policy instead about what teachers and students can display on campus. The board is now working on moving forward with that, and a new version is much more expansive and says employees must maintain something called viewpoint neutrality and can't display anything that seems dedicated to a particular identity or viewpoint.

This new resolution, unlike that July ban, doesn't specifically mention rainbows. Board member Sanford Nelson has been leading this effort around the ban, and last week, he seemed to say that the purpose of the board's new resolution is still to ban rainbow stickers like they tried to in July, just with less specific language.

**SANFORD
NELSON:** Now, we have language that we know will meet the legal muster and move us forward with the July resolution.

**HARSHAWN
RATANPAL:** However, at the board meeting last night, he was less forthcoming and would not directly answer whether the new policy would ban rainbow stickers. That new policy passed its first reading last night and will be up for a vote again next month.

NINA MOINI: What kind of reaction were you hearing from community members last night about this?

**HARSHAWN
RATANPAL:** You can really tell this issue is incensing the community. The room was completely packed. People were standing in the back of the room for hours and even overflowed to a completely different room. That included a lot of teachers in the district, many of whom were wearing a rainbow lanyard, probably close to 100 people overall.

The meeting itself was very chaotic, too, a lot of shouting at the board during the two and a half hours, and most of the audience seemed in opposition to the ban. About 14 people signed up for public comment, and only one or two spoke in favor of removing the stickers.

One of the voices in opposition was Tom Seaworth, a former school board member. He says the board really went about this in the wrong way, without getting any input from the community or administrators or teachers, and he says those stickers are worth keeping up, even if they can help save the life of just one student who feels isolated.

TOM SEAWORTH: It's a symbol for kids who are struggling, and it does include the LGBTQ community, but it's not exclusive to them. And so my concern is there are kids that are thinking of harming themselves. They know that they can go there.

HARSHAWN RATANPAL: He told me that since his time on the board, it seems like the school board has really lost its way when it comes to decorum and the way they pass policy. But on the flip side, I recently spoke to someone who thinks the rainbow stickers are not sending a message of inclusivity.

NINA MOINI: What did they have to say?

HARSHAWN RATANPAL: Yeah. That was Pastor Trevor Janich in Detroit Lakes. He says he spoke to a student who was being bullied by another student who identified as LGBTQ+. When the student went to tell a teacher, the student saw that rainbow sticker and felt like the teacher wouldn't take his side. Overall, Janich feels like the rainbows just send the wrong signal to some students.

NINA MOINI: OK. I understand the Detroit Lakes school board took on some other hot button issues in their meeting last night, too. Can you tell us about that?

HARSHAWN RATANPAL: Yeah. At board member Nelson's request, the board considered this letter to the Minnesota State High School League, which governs athletics in the state. The letter essentially calls on the league to prohibit transgender students from playing on girls sports teams.

Other districts have done similar, including Brainerd Public Schools just last week. And at Detroit Lakes last night, the board was, again, split 4 to 2, just like they were on the rainbow stickers, and the letter was approved. But one more twist.

The letter needs to be signed by the school board's official designated representative to the league, and the person tasked with doing that is refusing to. That's board member Julie Smith-Yliniemi. She says the Minnesota Human Rights Act protects trans athletes, so these changes to federal policy about trans people and women's sports, they just don't apply in Minnesota. Plus, the district is already being sued for allegedly violating the state law with the rainbow ban.

JULIE SMITH-YLINIEMI: Putting this on our radar right now is like putting fuel on the fire because there's no need. There's no, again, urgency. There's nothing in our face.

HARSHAWN RATANPAL: So if Smith-Yliniemi really doesn't sign it, there is another person the district could tap. The district's Activities Director is another designated representative, the board says, and they'll have him sign it. But it's not clear where he stands on all of this.

NINA MOINI: And all this is happening against this backdrop of at least one lawsuit seeking to end Minnesota's policy on trans athletes.

HARSHAWN RATANPAL: That's right. A judge heard arguments yesterday seeking to get one such case dismissed, and it's not clear when there will be a decision.

NINA MOINI: All right. Thanks for joining us, Harshawn.

HARSHAWN RATANPAL: Thanks for having me, Nina.

NINA MOINI: MPR News reporter Harshawn Ratanpal, joining us from our Moorhead Bureau.