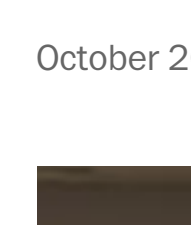


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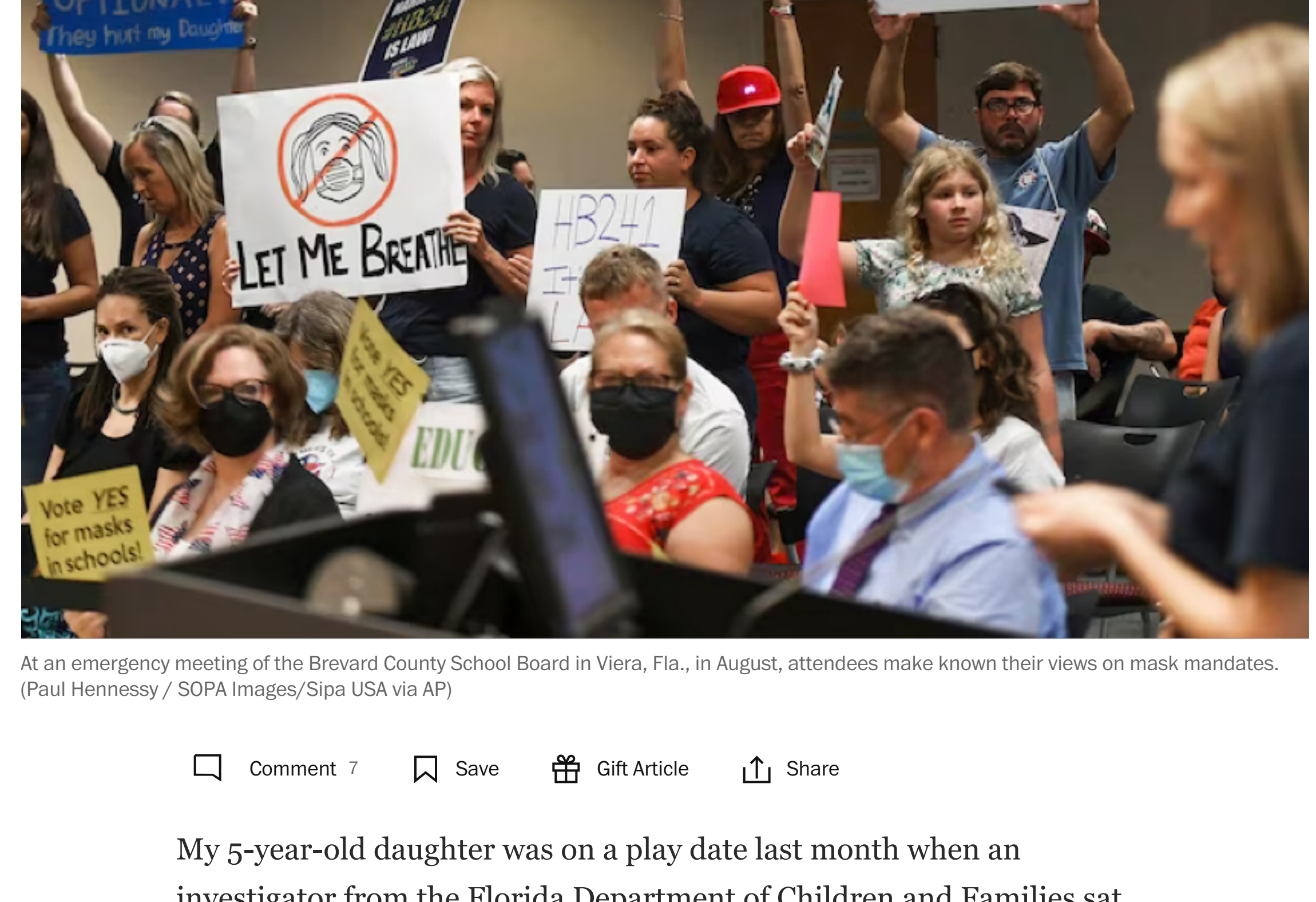
I'm a Florida school board member. This is how protesters come after me.

"Be careful, your mommy hurts little kids," an anti-masker shouted at my 5-year-old outside my home.



Perspective by Jennifer D. Jenkins
 Jennifer Jenkins was elected to the Brevard County School Board in Florida in August 2020. She continues to serve her community in child development and as a speech language pathologist.

October 20, 2021 at 4:17 p.m. EDT



At an emergency meeting of the Brevard County School Board in Viera, Fla., in August, attendees make known their views on mask mandates. (Paul Hennessy / SOPA Images/Sipa USA via AP)

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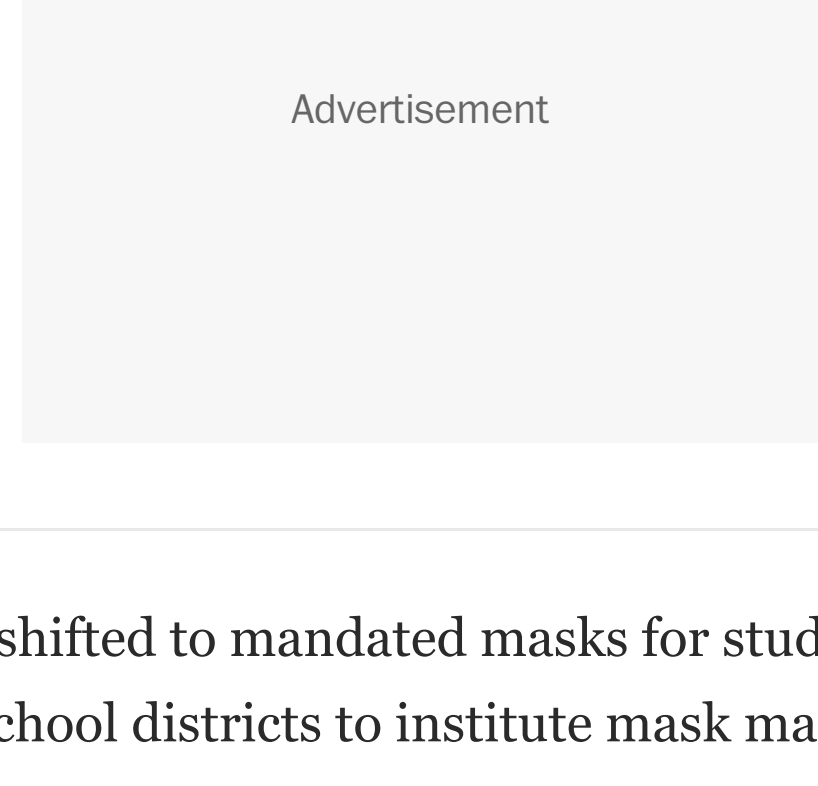
My 5-year-old daughter was on a play date last month when an investigator from the Florida Department of Children and Families sat at my kitchen table to question me about how I disciplined her, then accompanied me to the play date to check for nonexistent burn marks beneath her clothes. Someone had falsely reported that I abused my child. The report was quickly dismissed, but this was the low point in the short time I have been a Brevard County School Board member.

I'm a speech-language pathologist in the Brevard public school system, where my husband is a teacher. I ran for the school board last year because I was concerned about issues such as teacher pay, student equity and, oh yeah, the [coronavirus](#). As a progressive in a red county, I expected to be a target of conservatives; I did not expect to be called a Nazi and a pedophile and to be subjected to [months of threats](#), harassment and intimidation. But [school board meetings in Florida](#) and across the country, including in [Virginia](#), Illinois, Texas, Wisconsin, Wyoming and [Tennessee](#), have increasingly erupted over politicized issues such as masks, bathrooms and critical race theory — and the chaos, now with menacing if not outright violent overtones, has spilled out of the meetings and into the private lives of public servants.

In Brevard, the protests began with [Moms for Liberty](#), a purported [grass-roots organization](#) founded after my election by the incumbent I had unseated. Supplied with matching blue T-shirts, pocket copies of the Constitution and a hazy notion of critical race theory — which is not taught in the public schools — its members began showing up at school board meetings. Their first battle, in March, was over bathrooms. Moms for Liberty had zeroed in on the county's [LGBTQ guidelines](#) for administrators, a document outlining the rights of students as delineated in state and federal laws, including the right to dress and use bathrooms according to the gender they identify with. The group carried the torch for fears that their daughters would be exposed to sexual harassment and abuse by their male peers. A disinformation campaign spread through social media, leading the public to believe that this document was newly developed (it wasn't) and being kept secret. Protesters became regulars outside school board meetings. Trump flags waved in the parking lot. Young children, accompanied by their parents, shouted into megaphones, "Don't touch me, pedophiles!" LGBTQ students tried to speak while adults chanted "Shame!" Meetings were packed, and those who couldn't get in banged on the windows and doors.

[\[Leaving it to school boards to vote on mask rules is asking for trouble\]](#)

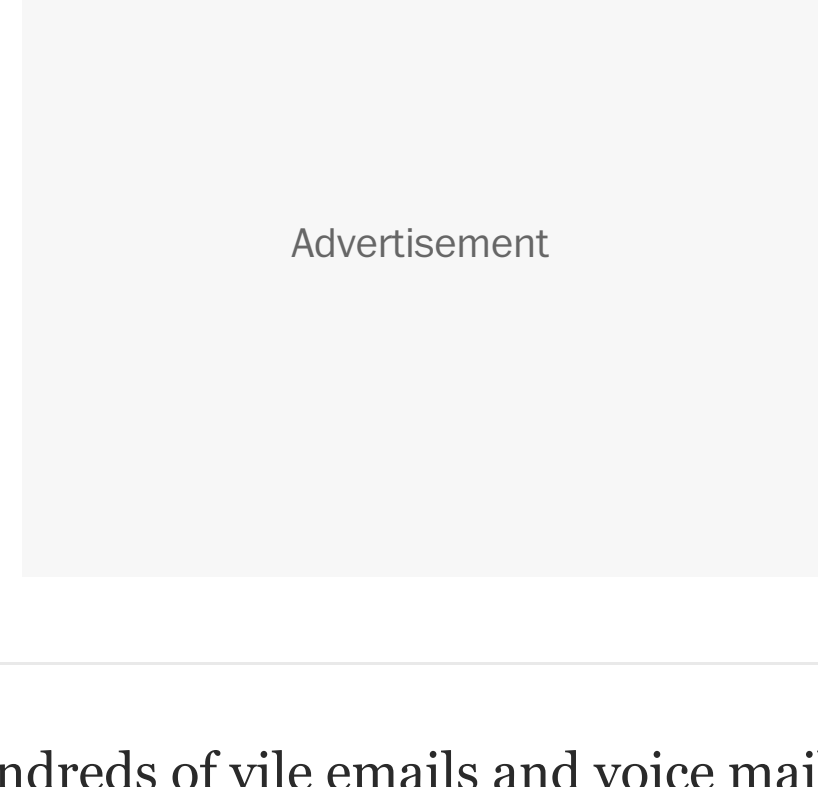
By April, protesters had begun to gather not just at board meetings but also in front of my house. A group of about 15 shouted "Pedophiles!" as my neighbors walked their dogs, pushing their infants in strollers. "We're coming for you," they yelled, mistaking friends standing on my porch for me and my husband. "We're coming at you like a freight train! We are going to make you beg for mercy. If you thought January 6 was bad, wait until you see what we have for you!"



In July, the battle shifted to mandated masks for students. Brevard is one of 11 Florida school districts to institute mask mandates in [defiance of Gov. Ron DeSantis's](#) executive order banning them. State Rep. Randy Fine, an anti-mask crusader, [posted](#) my cellphone number on his Facebook page and urged residents to call me. When my voice mailbox filled, he encouraged text messages. During televised board meetings, I still receive texts commenting on what I am saying and wearing.

After DeSantis removed me from the audience of a news conference promoting monoclonal antibody treatments and addressing concerns about mask mandates at the county Department of Health last month, more protesters arrived at my home. They claimed to have been sent by Fine, who had been standing beside the governor at the news conference. "Be careful, your mommy hurts little kids!" one shouted at my daughter. "You're going to jail!" they chanted. As I read my daughter a bedtime story inside, they walked outside her bedroom window toward their parked cars. I went out to ensure that they were leaving. One coughed in my face while another shouted, "Give her covid!" A third swung a "Don't Tread on Me" flag near my face. My neighbors told me they had seen protesters brandishing weapons in the church parking lot behind my house.

The next day, a large "FU" was burned into my lawn with weed killer. The bushes in front of my house were hacked down. That was the day the Department of Children and Families investigator showed up.

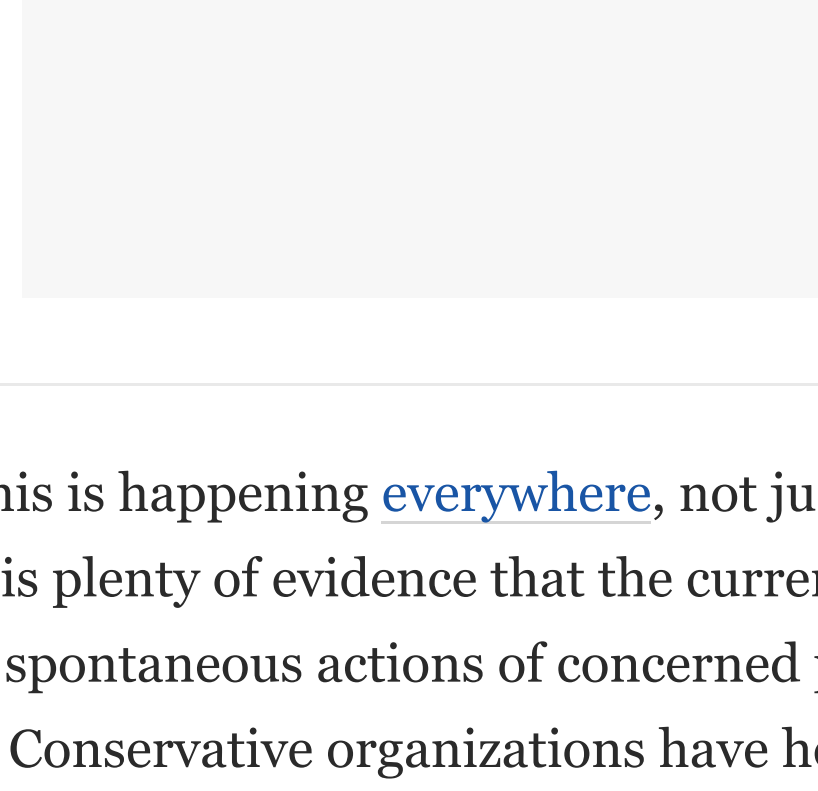


I have received hundreds of vile emails and voice mails. A suspicious car follows mine around town. All because I won a school board seat. An outed Democrat — school board races are nonpartisan — in a district that voted for Donald Trump over Joe Biden by 17 points. My opponent and I stood on opposite sides of the mask issue; I defeated the Republican incumbent by almost 10 points. From the beginning of my term to this day, I am the only board member of five who has received these threats and harassment over issues for which there is majority board support. The young, female, outspoken Democrat.

Recently, a woman passed me in the lobby of the school board offices and yelled, "There's the wicked witch!" Outside the building, as I was entering, the more restrained protesters had held posters labeling me a dictator and a Nazi. The vocal ones threatened me with jail — again. And now there was a king-size bedsheet affixed to two poles; it was printed with a blood-red hashtag demanding my recall. Sheriff's deputies stood ready to escort me to the front doors.

[\[Some schools are requiring everyone to mask up. That doesn't have to be permanent.\]](#)

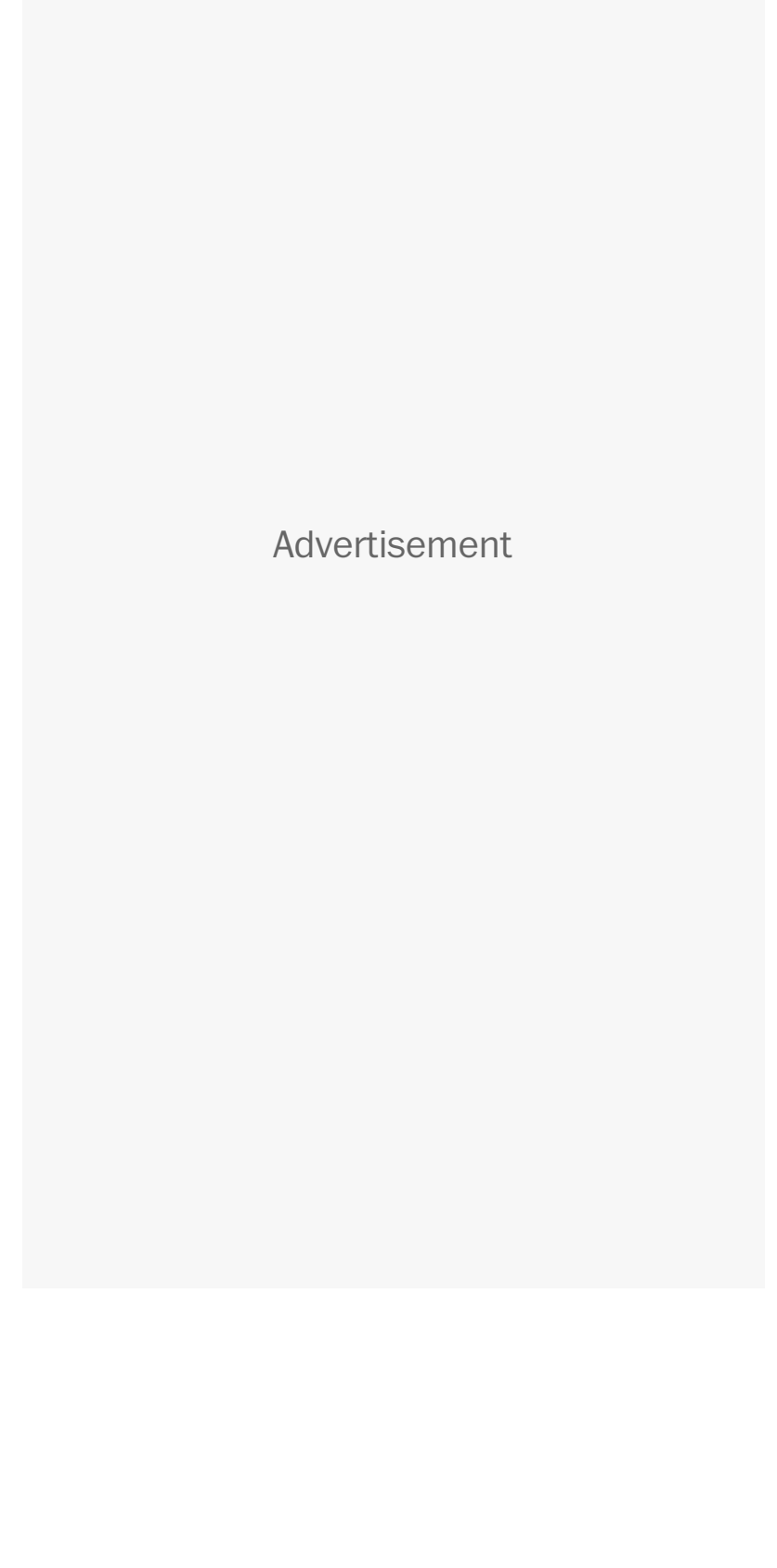
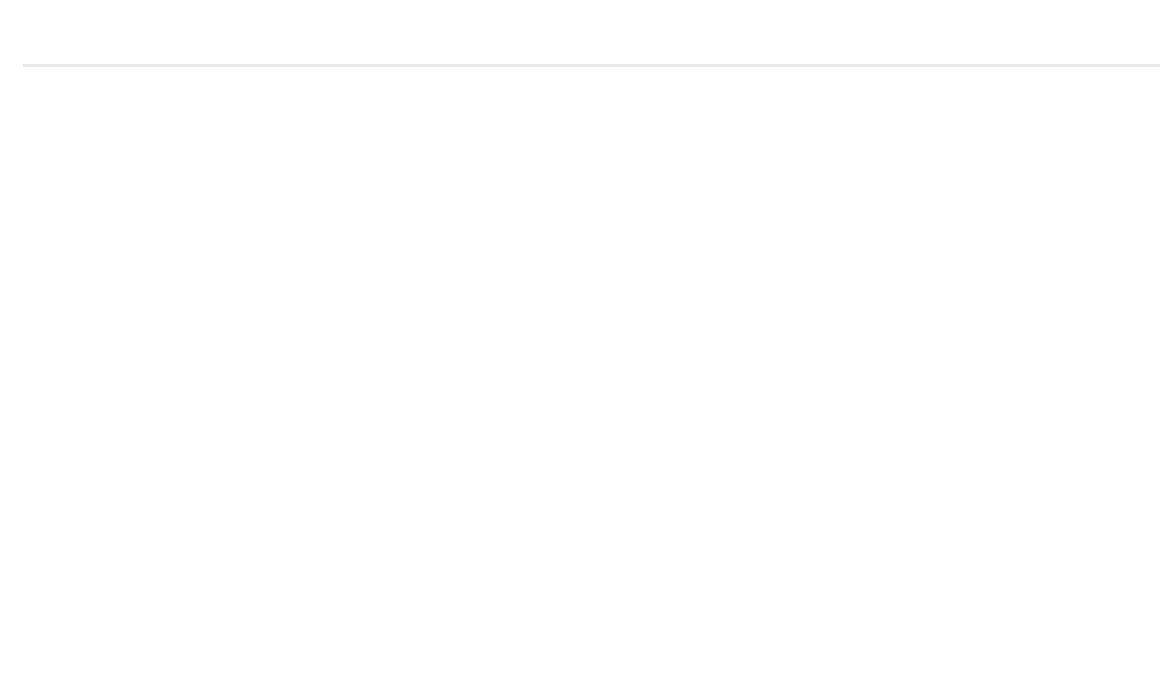
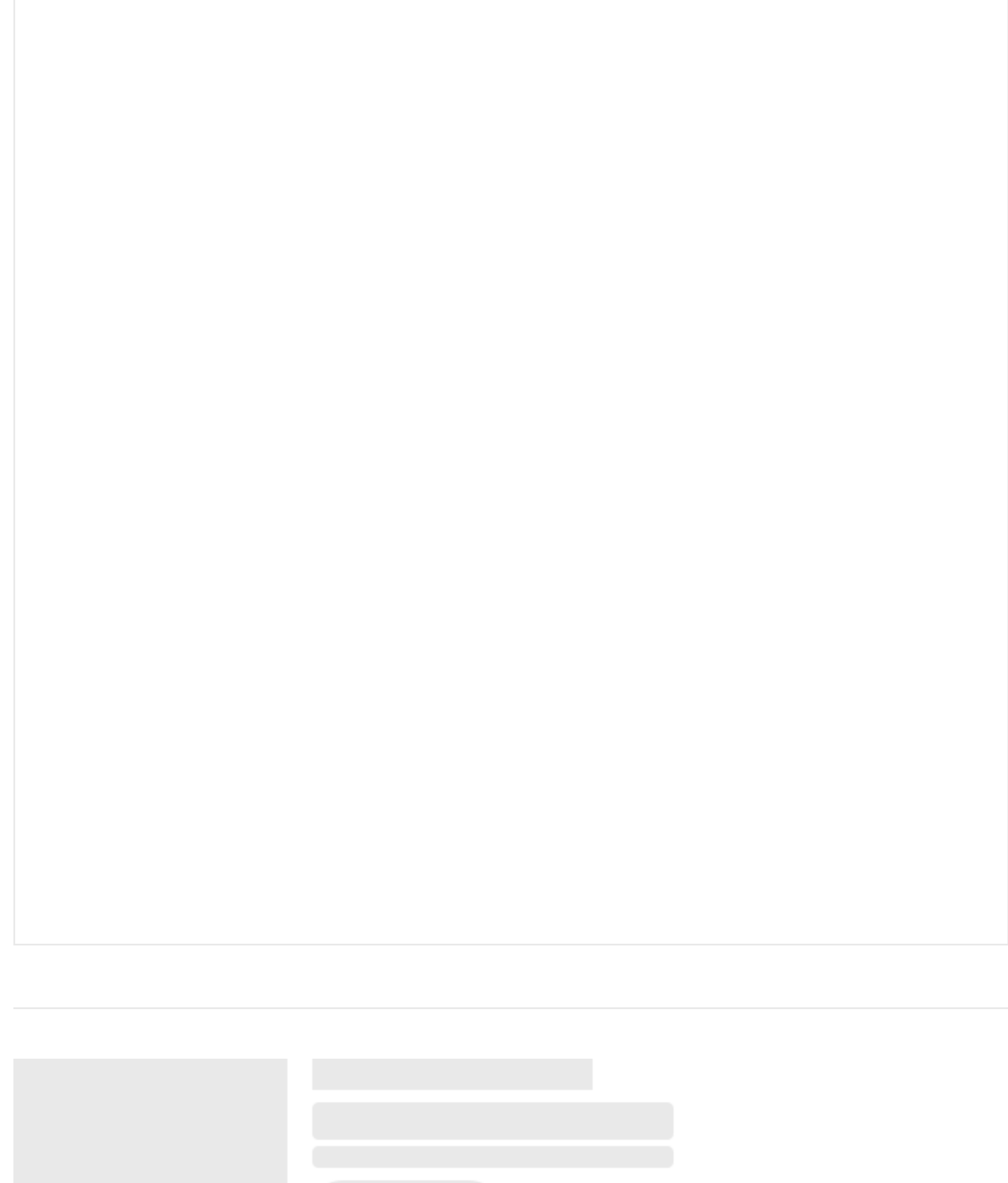
People who oppose masks have a right to be heard, even if I disagree with them. I will defend their First Amendment rights, up to and including the right to protest on public easements in front of my own house. If there are differences of opinion about what's fair for all students, I'm happy to discuss them. But I have rights, too, and that includes the right to be free from harassment and assault.



[Harassment](#) like this is happening [everywhere](#), not just in my Florida county. And there is plenty of evidence that the current [school board battles](#) are not the spontaneous actions of concerned parents who want to solve problems. Conservative organizations have held "School Board Boot Camp" and sent leaders from out of state to [speak](#) at school board meetings. According to The Washington Post, Republican [megadonors](#) have financed efforts to fight masks in schools. A [draft letter](#) that one conservative group circulated provides a script: "NAME is excited to be joining NAME OF SCHOOL this year," it reads, and "I have to speak up for what is best for my kids."

I agree. They do. And I do. But if their real mission is to sow political division until they get what they want — a mirror of their ideals in public education — they can't do it through threats and intimidation. If the real goal of protesting mask mandates at school board meetings is to light fires, I won't stand by and watch them burn.

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