

## EDUCATION

# Recall efforts launched against Apache Junction school board members. Here's why

**Madeleine Parrish**

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Stationed outside the Superstition Shadows Aquatic Center during its “April Pool’s Day” event on Saturday, a handful of teachers and community members caught the eye of passersby with a red tent decorated with signs that read “For Our AJUSD Kids” and “Sign the Recall Petition HERE!”

It was the first event to collect signatures for the recall of two Apache Junction Unified School District board members following the board’s 3-2 vote to sever ties with Superintendent Heather Wallace in early April. The decision has been met with an uproar from educators and parents.

The recall committee's main argument: The district has seen three superintendents in six years and, during that time, has spent over \$300,000 in severance payouts. Those are taxpayer dollars, money that could have gone toward refurbishing schools and teacher salaries, they told people.

Many who signed the petition had already heard about the efforts, some because they work or have kids in the district.

Though the board negotiated a “mutual severance agreement,” with Wallace, many in the district — including board member Bobby Bauders, who voted against the severance agreement and is helping to organize the recall efforts — believe that Wallace was forced out.

Now, dozens of frustrated educators and concerned parents and community members have joined forces to recall two of the three board members who voted to oust her: Gilbert Cancio and the board president, Dena Kimble. Gail Ross, the third board member who voted for the severance agreement, cannot be recalled until completing six months of her first term in office.

The committee, called "For Our AJUSD Kids," has until August 17 to collect at least 4,062 valid signatures for each board member to get the recalls on a ballot.

There has only been one successful school board recall effort in Pinal County in the past two decades, according to Nicole O’Brien, the assistant to the county superintendent.

Apache Junction is one of several Arizona school districts where the board and superintendent have recently decided to part ways.

**Previously:** Uproar after Apache Junction school board votes to sever ties with superintendent

## **Tension over test scores**

It remains unclear why the board voted to oust Wallace, who has been in the district for over two decades and is well-liked by many teachers and parents.

Although some educators in the district have expressed frustration at what they view as a lack of transparency

from the board, ideas are circulating about what drove the board's decision.

According to Bauders, fellow board members Kimble, Ross and Cancio created a hostile work environment for Wallace "through bullying, harassment, and threats."

In a statement, Kimble said that Bauders' accusations are false and that the decision for Wallace to leave was mutual.

Ross also disputed the claim that the board was hostile to Wallace.

"I do not believe requesting pertinent board information and the expectation of receiving that information constitutes a hostile work environment," Ross said.

Cancio declined to comment.

In Desert Vista Elementary School teacher Shannon Corbin's eyes, Wallace was a scapegoat for test scores that didn't meet the board's expectations. "The board wants us completely academic-driven," Corbin said. "Health and wellness, anything like that for staff and students, they don't think needs to play a part in their education."

During a Feb. 28 meeting, Kimble said, "Looking at our test scores ... I feel like we should apologize to the parents."

That comment "makes us all angry because we know how hard we've worked, and we're showing growth with these students," Corbin said.

"They're putting way too much emphasis on testing," said Denise Murphy, a parent of a 10th grader in the district, at a recall committee meeting. She cited the fact that the high school's letter grade improved to a B in the 2021-22

school year. "They're doing all these great things on campus," she said. "Wallace helped get those grants to make those things happen."

At the recall meeting, Amanda Radak, a parent of three students in the district, said, "Our children were getting the best education they've gotten in over a decade" under Wallace, and the decision to remove her was disappointing and non-transparent.

A March 28 discussion of spring 2023 test scores saw tension between Wallace and board members Cancio and Kimble. The assessments showed declines for some grade levels in English and math.

Wallace said that while there was work to be done, the scores didn't paint a complete picture. She said that principals and teachers have been working hard to see improvements in their students.

Cancio called the benchmark results "horrible."

Kimble said that there are "some kids that need extra help, and we gotta figure out a way how to do that."

In response, Wallace said the district is providing extra help, including small group instruction and extended days, to support students who lost learning due to the pandemic.

School districts across the country have been grappling with pandemic-related learning loss. The average U.S. public school student between grades three to eight lost half a year of learning in math and a quarter of a year in reading between 2019 and 2022, according to research from the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University and Stanford University's Educational Opportunity Project.

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## Educators leaving the district

At the board meeting following the decision to sever ties with Wallace, some educators warned of an exodus.

Peralta Trail Elementary School Principal Natalie Clement, who was set to be the junior high school's principal next year, publicly resigned.

"A school board must trust the leadership of the district," she said. When deciding to resign, she told the board that she asked herself, "Do we have evidence that our board trusts us?" and "Where are we going, and how will we ever get there if we don't give solutions time to work?"

Sixth-grade teacher Kerri Mortenson, who has taught in the district for a decade, also said that she had resigned.

"Several board meetings ago, the president of this board suggested that the teachers should apologize to parents," Mortenson said. "Okay, let me do that.

"I apologize to the parents that the school board has removed three superintendents in the last six years," she said. "I apologize to the parents and the community who have had to supplement classroom supplies while the school board frittered away your tax dollars all in the name of needing to change direction once again."

Apache Junction High School principal Chris Lineberry is leaving the district next year to serve as the principal of Casa Grande Union High School. In a Facebook post, he wrote that during the four years he served as principal, the high school went from an almost D letter grade — C by less than half a point — to a B. "Every year we have decreased suspensions and increased graduation rates," he wrote.

Sandra Leen, who is in her 14th year in the district, is resigning because of the board's decision to remove Wallace.

"I'm extremely emotional about it because I know that the district is not going to replace me," she said. During her 10 years as the district's strings teacher, she's seen her program grow from seven to 100 students, she said.

But without Wallace to back her up, she doesn't feel like her job is secure, she said.

"We have so many open positions," said Brandy Torp, a paraprofessional at Peralta Trail. "Daily, we get multiple emails about job openings."

Kimble said that staffing issues for the upcoming school year are no different than any prior year.

The district, which serves 2,950 students, has grappled with declining enrollment in recent years and has closed three schools since 2010. Over the past five years, it has seen a 19% decline in student population.

*Madeleine Parrish covers K-12 education. Do you have news to share about your school or school district? Reach her at [mparrish@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:mparrish@arizonarepublic.com) and follow her on Twitter at [@maddieparrish61](https://twitter.com/maddieparrish61).*