

How “Mama Bears” Won a Court Victory—and Helped Elect a Governor—in Virginia

Immigrant parents from Asia fight discrimination in admissions at a top high school **By ASRA Q. NOMANI**





About 200 people protested the removal of merit-based admissions at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Virginia. The author is in the front, in pink.

ANTONIO MARTIN

FOUR MEN STEPPED TOWARD ME as I stood, five feet tall, with a stack of books in my arms and papers in my hand, my back to a stage in a middle-school theater in Falls Church, Virginia, a western suburb of Washington, D.C.

“Are you trying to intimidate me?” I asked, watching the men inch closer to me, a Muslim single mother from India. “What is this?”

The men—all of them white—were official security personnel for our local school district, Fairfax County Public Schools—and their presence here felt to me like a show of force on the part of the school board, whose members were seated on an elevated dais in front of the stage. I had just stood before the mostly white school board members, speaker number nine in the public-participation portion of the board’s meeting on March 10, 2022.

In my comments, I had criticized the school board for its persistent efforts to change the admissions process at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology. The school, ranked by *U.S. News and World Report* as the No. 1 high school in the country, had for years admitted students through a merit-based and race-blind process. But in December 2020, the Fairfax County Public Schools board and superintendent, despite the pleas of many parents, had adopted an admissions policy aimed at increasing the representation of certain racial and ethnic groups at “TJ,” as it is known.

The new process eliminated the admissions test, guaranteed seats for 1.5 percent of each middle school’s 8th-grade class, and considered factors such as attendance at a middle school previously underrepresented at TJ. The aim was to increase the number of Black and Hispanic students in the student body; that aim was achieved, but only with a dramatic reduction in the number of Asian American students admitted. For the Class of 2025, assembled under the new standards, Asian students made up 54 percent of admitted students, in

contrast to 73 percent of students admitted to the Class of 2024 under the old rules.

On February 25, 2022, a federal judge had ruled that the new admissions policy was illegal, unfair, and discriminatory against Asian students. But not long after the ruling was announced, the Fairfax school board said that it would challenge the decision. We parents had come to the school board meeting to protest the new admissions process.

Suddenly, the immigrant mothers in the first rows of the audience broke out in a chant against the school board. “Racist!” shouted Suparna Dutta, an immigrant mother from India. “Racist!” yelled Norma Margulies, an immigrant from Peru. “Racist!” declared Ying Julia McCaskill, an immigrant from China.

From the back, Robert Rigby, Jr., a Latin teacher who was a member of the local teachers union, yelled “Stunt!” Nearby, Vanessa Hall, a mother who had just started a pro-school-board group with leaders of Fairfax Democrats, joined Rigby’s counter-heckling. A few rows away, Marianne Burke, the local leader of Fairfax Indivisible, an arm of the national progressive organization Indivisible, cheered them on.

As the security officials circled me, the mothers continued to chant, “Racist! Racist! Racist!” Suddenly the board chair, Stella Pekarsky, called a 15-minute recess, and the board members, superintendent, and other officials hurried off stage and out of sight.

Almost seven decades ago, in 1956, white officials in Virginia tried to keep Black students out of certain schools. Now, white officials, hoping to increase the representation of Black and Hispanic students in our most advanced school, were limiting the enrollment of Asian students. In the early 20th century, politician Harry Byrd, the governor of Virginia and later a U.S. senator, led a Democratic Party political machine, the “Byrd Machine,” that dominated Virginia politics for much of the century. In the 1950s, Byrd, an avowed white separatist, led a campaign called the “massive resistance” to oppose the

racial integration of public schools. A Richmond law firm, Hunton & Williams, represented the school board in the case of *Dorothy E. Davis v. the County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia*. It became one of the five cases grouped together in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, the 1954 case in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled racial segregation in schools violated the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees equal protection under the law.

Today, the firm is Hunton Andrews Kurth, with annual revenues of



In July 2021, a statue of former Virginia governor Harry Byrd was removed from Capitol Square in Richmond, Virginia. Byrd was a white separatist who opposed school integration.

The changes to the TJ admissions process seemed inspired not just by the strong representation of Asian American students at the school, but by outright anti-Asian sentiment.

about \$830 million. One of its clients is the Fairfax County School Board. But this time, the discrimination is not against Black students. This time, the law firm and school board are defending a policy that denies seats to Asian students. (Representatives of Hunton Andrews Kurth did not respond to my requests for comment.)

As the mothers rained charges of “Racist!” on the school board at the March 10 meeting, the board’s chief counsel, John Foster, left his seat in a section on the side of the theater for senior staff and scurried onto the stage. Along with the board members and the superintendent, Scott Brabrand, Foster disappeared backstage.

The showdown at that meeting was the climax of a long, painful battle these parents had been waging for almost two years.

A Principal’s “Call to Action”

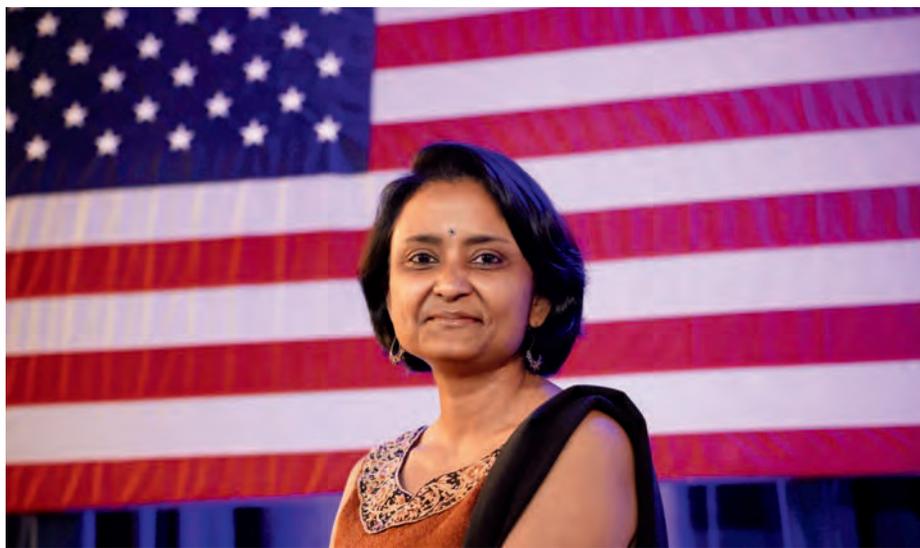
Over the past 10 years, the school board has made various changes to the admissions process at TJ in an attempt to build a student body that reflects the racial and ethnic population in the county. These efforts have sparked controversy, but none has yielded many more Black and Hispanic students at the school. In the summer of 2020, as racial tensions heated up around the country, the topic of TJ’s racial and ethnic makeup surfaced once again.

On Sunday evening, June 7, 2020, 13 days after George Floyd’s murder, Principal Ann Bonitatibus wrote a “call to action” to the students and families of Thomas Jefferson High School. Bonitatibus, who is white, implored TJ’s students and parents to “think of privileges” they might hold “that others may not.” She proposed getting rid of the school’s Colonial mascot, which she called a “symbol that perpetuated racism.” And she pointed out the “equity gap” in TJ admissions, noting that the school then enrolled 32 Black students and 47 Hispanic students—a proportion that did not “reflect the racial

composition” of Fairfax County schools. Asian American students made up 70 percent of the student body while they comprised 20 percent of students in the county.

I implore you to think about your own journey and discovery of race and economic advantage in America. My parents never had to teach me about what it means to be white. I never had to worry that someone would look at the color of my skin and think I either may not be smart enough to learn or I should be exceedingly smart in a certain subject. No one has surveilled me in a store while shopping, or locked their cars or front doors out of fear when seeing me in their neighborhood. While I did not come from a family with economic means, the color of my skin has given me privileges that others do not have. Please think of privileges you hold that others may not.

With that email, the principal unwittingly launched a local parents’ movement that would over the next two years help



EVELYN HOCKSTEIN / REUTERS

Suparna Dutta, a “mama bear” in the Coalition for TJ, was never involved with politics prior to the school’s admissions changes. She is now chairperson of Educators for Youngkin.

elect a governor and motivate parents nationwide to speak up.

Some people might view efforts to change the TJ admissions process as a way to help disadvantaged students, but we see them as deliberate moves to reduce the number of Asian American students at the school. And the changes proposed in 2020 seemed inspired not just by the strong representation of Asian American students at TJ, but by outright anti-Asian sentiment. Some of the private communications among the board members lend credence to this view.

At home in Fairfax, Virginia, Suparna Dutta read the email. She recalled the difficult journey her father had made in 1947, fleeing war in modern-day Bangladesh with just the clothes on

his back as India freed itself from British rule. The 13 colonies that had led the American Revolution against the British had been an inspiration to India's freedom fighters, and her father had grown up in a village called Hamankardi, walking miles to school. Dutta had arrived in the United States on India's Independence Day, August 15, 1993, as a graduate student in environmental engineering in Knoxville, Tennessee, with a bag of lentils and \$250 borrowed from her father. After falling in love with a colleague at work, she settled in Virginia, quietly raising their daughter and son, a rising sophomore at TJ in the summer of 2020. She had never spoken at a school board meeting or gotten involved in politics. That was about to change.

Across town in McLean, Virginia, another TJ mother, Yuyan Zhou, read the principal's email. She had survived the brutal Cultural Revolution of her youth, from 1966 through 1976, when Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Tse-Tung waged a bloody purge of the nation's intellectuals, weaponizing an army of youth into a paramilitary movement called the Red Guard. Children would turn in their parents, teachers, and other adults for questioning Mao's ideas. One day when Zhou was a girl, her teacher told her to stand in class and, in a moment of public shaming, ordered her to remove her red scarf—a symbol of her status in the Young Pioneers, a youth branch of the Chinese Communist Party. In 1989, Zhou stood in Tiananmen Square, demonstrating against China's oppressive regime. The next year, she immigrated to the United States.

A member of the TJ Parent Teacher Student Association for eight years, Zhou had organized Lunar New Year celebrations attended by the principal. She was about to get a lot more involved as the parent of two TJ alumni.

The next morning, another TJ mother, Helen Miller, penned a letter to Bonitatibus, telling the principal, "After not sleeping at all last night, I'm hopping mad!!"

The mothers had no idea what was happening behind the scenes.

Hopping Mad

On June 1, 2020, the Fairfax County school district issued a public report on the students admitted to the TJ Class of 2024. In the section on the ethnicity of accepted students, the entry for the number of Black students read "**TS," which meant "too small for reporting (TS)," a footnote explained. The footnote went on to say: "Those numbers have been included with the Multiracial/Other category. This category [TS] includes students who numbered 10 or fewer."

On June 7, the day the TJ principal sent her letter to students and parents, a local Democratic leader, Lowell Feld, published an article on his blog, Blue Virginia, which features "Virginia politics from a progressive and Democratic perspective."

Feld's blog-post headline read: "As People Across America Protest Racial Inequity, #1 Public High School in the Country

The Fairfax County events unfolded in the context of nationwide tension over test-based admissions and Black representation at elite schools.

("TJ" in Fairfax, VA) Just Admitted ZERO African Americans."

The *Washington Post's* education reporter, Hannah Natanson, a graduate of Harvard University and the private and pricey Georgetown Day School, tweeted out the false information.

Harry Jackson, a local father who was the first Black student from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, admitted to the U.S. Naval Academy, knew personally the headline was wrong. His son had just been admitted to the TJ Class of 2025, one of six Black students accepted.

Later that day, Blue Virginia published an interview with Atif Qarni, the Virginia education secretary, in which Qarni urged readers to "check out" the language in the 2020 state budget bill aimed at increasing student and staff diversity at the state's 19 magnet schools, known as Governor's Schools. A Marine Corps veteran, Qarni was a former social studies teacher who lost two bids for the state legislature.

At 8:19 a.m. the next day, Democratic state senator Scott Surovell wrote to school board member Karen Corbett Sanders, also a Democrat, raising the issue of TJ admissions. "I saw the TJ admissions numbers," he began. And then he said that the state budget passed that spring contained language requiring each Governor's School to submit a report to the governor describing its "diversity goals" by October 1 of each year.

He wrote: "I was curious where TJ was on this given that public meetings are required and there is a 10/1 deadline."

Surovell had taken more than a "curious" interest in TJ. He had been trying to gut the TJ admissions process for years, even arguing that Governor's Schools should be shut down "if they are unable to adopt more equitable admissions policies." He told me, "The policies I advocate for benefit everyone. . . . I am not trying to keep anyone out of Thomas Jefferson." However, in 2018, at his invitation, a retired teacher from Rachel Carson Middle School in Fairfax County Public Schools testified in the Virginia Senate that "certain communities" were "ravenous" about pushing their children to achieve in academics and extracurriculars and that she had taught "many kids who came here from India specifically to attend Carson and TJ." She asserted that "the parents come here, however they come here, put the kids in Carson—pipeline to TJ."

Hours after Surovell sent his email to Corbett Sanders, she responded: "Please be assured that I am as angry and

disappointed in these numbers as you are.”

Corbett Sanders had just gotten off the phone with superintendent Brabrand and had also had conversations with education secretary Qarni.

A small group of TJ alumni, alumni parents, and activists, including Burke, the leader of Fairfax Indivisible, and Hall, the counter-heckler, circulated the false information about “ZERO” Black admissions to TJ. That summer, some of these parents and alumni spoke at school board meetings to argue that merit-based admissions tests were “racist” and that anyone who promoted them was a racist and a “segregationist.” That summer, alumni activists registered their organization, TJ Alumni Action Group, as a 501(c)4 political lobbying organization. They weaponized the false news of the admissions numbers to push for admissions changes, including a call to “Occupy TJ” and even dismantle the school completely. (When I asked Burke and Hall for comment, Burke did not respond and Hall wrote that she was blocking my email address.)

In the days following the TJ principal’s email, we “hopping mad” parents started talking to each other. The next week, I testified for the first time to my school board, warning them that our school faced a race war fomented by our principal and a few activist alumni. That same night, Dutta spoke to the school board, also for the first time, so nervous she couldn’t figure out how to turn on her camera.

Our group wanted to learn from other parents who had fought the battle over admissions to selective public schools. The parents in New York City were battle-hardened. On June 21, 2020, parents in Fairfax County had their first Zoom call with New York City parent activists. On that call we met Chien Kwok, who is a graduate of Brooklyn Technical High School, one of New York City’s specialized high schools that use a standardized admissions test. He is also cofounder of PLACE NYC—Parent Leaders for Accelerated Curriculum Education in New York City—an organization of mostly Asian immigrant parents. Their efforts started as a private Facebook group that has grown to 2,800 members.

“Be unapologetic,” he said on the Zoom call. “Do *not* be shamed.”

On June 24, Qarni convened a task force, which included the TJ principal, to examine diversity issues at the Governor’s Schools. He later told The Associated Press that he wanted to eliminate the entrance exam and develop an admissions process that would consider an applicant’s socioeconomic status. (Qarni

didn’t respond to my requests for comment on this story.)

Across the country, this dynamic was repeating itself. George Floyd’s killing at the hands of police had sparked a national soul-searching on race. School superintendents, principals, teachers, and board officials were sending missives like Bonitatibus’s, focusing on social justice, race, and racism, while parents, inexperienced in school board politics, were worrying about when the pandemic shutdowns would end and their kids could return to school.

In an August 2020 article, Associated Press reporter Matthew Barakat mentioned the launch of our new organization, Coalition for TJ. That same day, a TJ alumna, Makya Renée Little, then-



Virginia education secretary Atif Qarni organized a task force to evaluate diversity issues at TJ and 18 other magnet schools designated as “Governor’s Schools.”

STEPHANIE KLEIN-DAVIS / THE ROANOKE TIMES VIA AP

president of the TJ Alumni Action Group, purchased the domain names coalitionforTJ.org and .com and redirected the domain names to the website of her group. She is now running as a Democratic candidate for the Virginia House of Delegates. (Little and the TJ Alumni Action Group did not respond to requests for comment.)

New Admissions Policy

The Fairfax County events unfolded in the context of nationwide tension over test-based admissions and Black representation at elite schools (see “Exam School Admissions Come under Pressure amid Pandemic,” *features*, Spring 2021). The U.S. Supreme Court will hear a case of alleged anti-Asian discrimination in admissions by Harvard University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In New York City, parents continually wage campaigns to keep merit-based admissions at Stuyvesant High School and in the city’s

advanced academic programs. In 2021, the Boston school board installed zip code quotas that reduced the number of Asian students at Boston Latin School and two other select-admissions schools. That year, the San Francisco school board replaced merit-based admissions to Lowell High School with a lottery, reducing the number of Asians admitted and inspiring the recent recall of three school board members (see “School Board Shakeup in San Francisco,” *features*, Summer 2022) and a subsequent return to merit-based admissions.

School board officials, state politicians, and local activists launched a campaign to change admissions to TJ with one clear goal: to increase the number of Black and Hispanic students—even if it meant discriminating against Asian applicants. Our families and students were on the wrong side of brown for the new “equity” warriors.

In a September 2020 Zoom session with students and parents from TJ and the Maggie L. Walker Governor’s School, education secretary Qarni said, “It’s illegal or frowned upon when an athlete uses performance-enhancing drugs to get a leg up. So, when you have a standardized achievement test and you have the luxury of getting a lot of help with tutoring services, and you come from a more well-resourced family, you have a leg up.”

Members of the mostly white school board, the education secretary, and activists called the Coalition for TJ members and TJ students “toxic,” “racist,” and even “white supremacist,” as I later testified to the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties subcommittee of the U.S. House Judiciary Committee.

At a virtual town hall on October 7, 2020, Superintendent Brabrand laid out his plans for a new admissions process at TJ. He said he wanted to eliminate the entrance exam, which he characterized as “pay to play,” though he gave no evidence for his allegation that families spent up to \$15,000 on test preparation for their kids.

Meanwhile, Asian Americans were being targeted with brutal violence across the country, from New York City to San Francisco.

Despite our protests, in December 2020, the board scrapped TJ’s race-blind, merit-based admissions process and put its new one in place. Henceforth the school would do a “holistic review” of “students whose applications demonstrate enhanced merit” and then offer seats to the 550 “highest-evaluated students.” Admissions criteria would include GPA; a problem-solving essay; “experience factors,” such as whether the applicant was economically disadvantaged, an English language learner, or a special-education student; and a “student portrait sheet” through which applicants would be asked to show they have certain attributes and “21st Century Skills” such as leadership, effective communication skills, problem-solving abilities, creativity, and other qualities. Each public middle school would be guaranteed a number of seats “equal to 1.5% of that school’s 8th grade student population,” presuming that at least that many students apply from a given school.

Superintendent Scott Brabrand laid out his plans for a new admissions process at TJ. He said he wanted to eliminate the entrance exam, which he characterized as “pay to play.”

When I asked school district administrators and officials for comment for this article, Ellen Kennedy, deputy division counsel at Fairfax County Public Schools, wrote in an email to the editors of *Education Next*: “We find it highly unusual that we are being asked for ‘comment’ on allegations that the writer is simultaneously advancing in active litigation against us. Ms. Nomani is the co-founder and primary spokesperson of a group that has been in litigation with the School Board since early 2021 regarding the Thomas Jefferson High School admissions policy that is the subject of this piece.”

Kennedy wrote that the new admissions policy is “race-blind and gender-blind, and applications are anonymized such that evaluators do not know even the name of any applicants.” She added that my comments about the policy were “inflammatory,” “out of context,” or “disproved,” or that they “remain sharply contested.”

She added: “The policy promotes broader access to the school by guaranteeing seats for the highest-evaluated applicants from every public middle school in the five counties that send students to TJ and taking into account whether the student is economically disadvantaged, an English Language Learner, or has an Individualized Education Plan” for special education services.

Although the new admissions protocols didn’t mention race, the net effect was to increase the number of students from every major racial and ethnic group at the school except Asians, whose numbers fell.

In Fall 2020, board chair Stella Pekarsky wrote in a text message to her fellow board member Abrar Omeish: “The Asians hate us.”

That’s what we had become to them. “The Asians.”

Parents warned board officials they would go down in history for perpetuating the same kind of systemic discrimination condemned in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The board was sending a perverse message: hard work, study, parental involvement, and discipline aren’t necessarily rewarded and may be trumped by other values. Members of our coalition disagree with this perspective. We believe these values and practices are bedrock foundations for well-functioning schools, well-functioning societies, and well-functioning children.

Pekarsky said in another Fall 2020 text to Omeish that the new admissions process would “kick ou[t] Asians.”

Omeish responded that “there has been an anti asian feel underlying some of this, hate to say it lol.”

She continued: “They’re discriminated against in this process too.”

The Race for Governor

In September 2020, our parent group held protests at the school and voiced our concerns to the school board, the state legislature, and the office of education secretary Qarni. We coordinated with local parents who had organized another new group, Open FCPS, to persuade the school board to open the schools after the pandemic shutdowns.

One morning, as a group of our Coalition for TJ parents, including Dutta, readied to speak to Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, we got bad news. Northam was canceling the meeting. In challenging authority, many of our parents have had to overcome cultural barriers, and their activism came from a place of moral courage. We have faced disparaging references to us as “Asian tiger moms,” and one day I thought: let us embrace our sacred duty as “mama bears” and “papa bears.” Our new moniker was born.

In spring 2021, as Democratic and Republican candidates canvassed to win their parties’ nominations for governor and lieutenant governor, our parents organized debates. None of the Democratic candidates appeared. Coalition for TJ parents asked Terry McAuliffe’s campaign for a meeting. One of his staffers told a coalition member that the campaign had a suggested contribution of \$20,000 for a one-hour virtual visit. Our group balked. (Neither Northam nor McAuliffe responded to my request for comment on this story.)

Meanwhile, Republican candidate Glenn Youngkin met with parents, expressing his support for merit-based admissions at TJ. When Youngkin won the Republican nomination, Dutta raised her hand to volunteer to lead an Educators for Youngkin Coalition. She organized webinars, knocked on doors, and introduced the candidate to a crowd of about 500 cheering supporters at his closing campaign stop in Fairfax County.

Past midnight on election night, in Chantilly, Virginia, local parents converged on the Westfields Marriott for the Youngkin campaign’s official watch party. In the ballroom, a DJ pumped out Huey Lewis and the News’ 1985 hit song “The Power of Love” as Dutta grinned from ear to ear. Political commentators declared Youngkin the winner. A cheer broke out.

In the Marriott ballroom, Dutta embraced friends. I did a television interview with Laura Ingraham of Fox News about the parents’ movements. I was wearing medical scrubs to which

I’d added the inscription: “Mama Bear Movement.”

Later, Dutta stood in front of the stage, shoulder to shoulder with other parents who felt the school board and school and state education officials had dismissed them since June 2020. She and this new movement of “hopping mad” mama and papa bears had defeated the Woke Army at the ballot box.

“I’m so happy,” she said, grinning.

That week, Democratic political consultant James Carville said “wokeism” had led to the Democratic defeat in Virginia.

Courtroom Showdown

The court battle was still unsettled. Pacific Legal Foundation, a libertarian public-interest law firm, had filed a lawsuit on behalf of Coalition for TJ families, seeking equal protection



WILL NEWTON / FOR THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

School board member Abrar Omeish said in a text message to the board chair that there was “an anti-Asian feel underlying” the change to the admissions process at TJ.

under the 14th amendment—the same protection that Black families sought in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

On Friday, February 25, 2022, at 2:50 p.m., Erin Wilcox, an attorney at Pacific Legal Foundation, leading the legal fight, wrote a quick email to the parents of Coalition for TJ.

“WE WON!!”

At home, Suparna Dutta got the news and responded, incredulous: “What? We won?!”

Indeed, we had won.

In a 31-page ruling, U.S. District Court Judge Claude Hilton ruled that Fairfax County school officials violated the law when they changed admissions requirements at TJ in a manner that reduced the number of Asian American students admitted. Hilton granted the coalition’s motion for summary judgment, giving us a win in the case.

Hilton ruled that the school board, the admissions director,

the principal, and the superintendent had installed a system that was “racially motivated” and discriminatory against Asians.

He said “the Board defaulted to a system that treats applicants unequally in hopes of engineering a particular racial outcome.”

The judge said the new admissions process amounted to racial balancing and that racial balancing for its own sake was unconstitutional and illegal.

That Sunday afternoon, Dutta hosted a lunch on her back deck to celebrate our victory. We were South Asian and Chinese. Muslim and Hindu. Mothers and fathers. We represented families who are Asian, Black, Hispanic, and multiracial—from more than 30 different countries.

We had been up against, strangely enough, some of our country’s biggest civil-rights organizations. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund said it was “appalled” at the judge’s decision. These groups use social media hashtags like #StopAsianHate, but they turn a blind eye to anti-Asian discrimination in school admissions.

If the legal and moral ramifications of these policies are not enough to deter their advocates, perhaps the politics will be. In San Francisco, in Virginia’s Fairfax and Loudoun counties, and in dozens of places in between, parents—many of them Asian and immigrant—are forging a movement.

After the successful recall of the three San Francisco school board members on February 15, Democratic consultant David Axelrod, a top White House aide to President Obama, said, “Parents should absolutely be involved in the schools their kids attend. Politicians absolutely should not!” And just a few days before Hilton’s ruling, on February 22, 2022, Michael Bloomberg, former New York City mayor and a contender for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, warned that Democrats are “headed for a wipeout” in the midterm elections this November if the party does not make an “immediate

U.S. District Court Judge Claude Hilton ruled that Fairfax County school officials violated the law when they changed admissions requirements at TJ in a manner that reduced the number of Asian American students admitted.

course correction” that prioritizes quality education over “political correctness” and fighting “culture wars.” Anyone tempted to dismiss Axelrod or Bloomberg as older white men trying to protect the status quo may want to consider that plenty of Asian, immigrant, Black, and Hispanic parents feel the same way.

On the day our mama bears and papa bears gathered on Dutta’s back deck to celebrate Judge Hilton’s decision, I pulled out from my bag a silk scarf I had been saving for Yuyan Zhou ever since she shared with me her childhood story of having her red scarf removed.

We thanked her for everything she has done not only for our country’s Asian American children but for all children, because in equality, all of society progresses. As I tied the scarf over her shoulders, tears of joy fell from Zhou’s eyes.

The next week, Dutta and Ying Julia McCaskill drove together to meet Virginia Department of Education officials in Richmond. The next day, they met with the state’s new attorney general, Jason Miyares.

That night, the women headed to the Fairfax County school board meeting, joining up with Norma Margulies, Yuyan Zhou, and other parents.

They exchanged stories and assembled inside the middle-school theater for the board meeting.

When I stepped forward to speak, the other mothers sat behind me. “You are the new face of racism,” I told the school board, as a mother held a sign calling the school board the “new ‘massive resistance.’”

That was when the security guards surrounded me and our mothers stood their ground.

The next morning, the lawyers for Hunton Andrews Kurth went to court to ask Judge Hilton to issue a stay on his ruling, pending the school board’s appeal. The judge said no.



Pacific Legal Foundation attorney Erin Wilcox, pictured here at the microphone, filed a lawsuit against the Fairfax County School Board, alleging anti-Asian discrimination.

MATTHEW BARAKAT, AP

But the battle was not over. The Fairfax County School Board retained the Obama administration’s former solicitor general, Donald Verrilli, to argue its appeal. In April, a panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit ruled that the board could keep its new admissions process in place while its appeal moved through the courts. On April 25, the U.S. Supreme Court refused the coalition’s plea to overturn

As the coalition said in a statement following the Supreme Court’s April 25 ruling, “our struggle for justice is not over. We are not at all dissuaded.”

Two years after speaking to our school board for the first time, Suparna Dutta missed a phone call. It was from Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin. She connected with him the next day, and he shared some big news not only for



ANNA MONEYMAKER / GETTY IMAGES

Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin, a Republican, met with parents and expressed his support for merit-based admissions at TJ. Terry McAuliffe and other Democratic candidates would not meet with parents to discuss the issue or participate in parent-organized debates.

that decision. For the Class of 2026, chosen under the new criteria, approximately 60 percent of TJ’s admission offers went to Asian students, 21 percent to white students, 8 percent to Hispanic students, and 6 percent to Black students.

The Supreme Court’s order was only a temporary reprieve for the Fairfax County schools and others that have turned away from merit-based admissions. The pendulum may well swing again after the court decides on the Harvard University and University of North Carolina cases, which it is scheduled to hear this fall. We are scheduled to argue our case before the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals this fall, and we will take our case to the Supreme Court if we lose.

her but for all of our parent advocates. He would soon be naming Dutta to the Virginia Board of Education.

The announcement of her appointment went out on June 30. The original “hopping mad” mother, Helen Miller, wrote to Dutta: “Such excellent news!!! Congratulations, Suparna!! Thanks for being the voice for us all! Well deserved!”

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