

**Education**

# Student Leadership Group Responds to Backlash at School Board Meetings

Santa Barbara Students Learn About Growing Right-Wing Presence  
at Public Meetings



*Parent and former Goleta school board candidate Greg Hammel speaks at the April 12 Santa Barbara Unified school board meeting. | Credit: Courtesy*

By **Jun Starkey**



Thu Apr 21, 2022 | 8:53am

After students from Future Leaders of America (FLA) were ridiculed and harassed for their participation in a few Santa Barbara Unified School Board meetings, FLA and members of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center held a forum earlier this April to discuss the history of right-wing antagonism in school board rooms across America.

During a January 25 school board meeting, students from FLA spoke in favor of a redistricting map they had worked with the Central Coast Alliance United for a Stable Economy (CAUSE) to create, which did more to consolidate majority Latine populated areas than the other maps submitted.

Following a few students' comments, members of the public began speculating that the students were given scripts and didn't truly believe what they were saying. Among the speakers were Superintendent of Schools candidate Christy Lozano and former Goleta school board candidate Greg Hammel. Lozano accused FLA of soliciting students to speak at the board meeting in exchange for community service hours. "Kids, you did a good job. It's just too bad they're using you for political activities," Lozano said. "What do kids know about redistricting?"

Hammel had previously interacted with FLA when he joined one of the group's Zoom meetings on January 21. Hammel told the *Independent* he joined with his son, who needed community service hours, and was kicked out after 10 minutes. FLA organizers and students have a different account of this interaction, stating Hammel repeatedly disrupted the meeting with "incoherent rants" and didn't answer when the group asked if he was in the right meeting. Hammel took this interaction to mean the group did not care about differing opinions. "This [Future Leaders of America] thing is a joke," Hammel said at the January 25 meeting. "It's scripted writing for all these kids who can't express their own thoughts."

Students who spoke said they were taken aback and did not initially know how to process the comments made toward them. Somar Samaan Aparicio, a sophomore at San Marcos High School, and Emily Pineda, a junior at Santa Barbara High School, both spoke during the January 25 meeting and said it was incredibly hurtful to have parents and teachers imply they couldn't think for themselves. "If adults are attacking children without trying to find common ground, they're just creating doomsday scenarios," Samaan Aparicio said.

On April 8, FLA and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center held a forum discussing the history of the politicization of school board meetings in hopes of providing perspective to students who felt attacked and threatened during the school board meetings.

The presentation, created by Dr. John Rogers at UCLA, addressed a collection of studies referred to as the "Conflict Campaign." The Conflict Campaign focuses on the rise of critical race theory discussions in school board meetings, and in the media, and how well-known Republicans have encouraged their constituents to demand critical race theory, and anything remotely related to it, be banned from public schools. This encouragement has led to much more politically charged school board meetings across the country, though the study acknowledges that much of the information circulating around critical race theory, and any instruction meant to educate on racial disparities, is often incorrect or exaggerated.

Pineda said she spent a few hours drafting her comment for the January 25 school board meeting. After having some time to process the comments directed at her and fellow FLA members, she ultimately decided not to take them to heart. "We have our own voice," she said. "After many years of being disrespected by adults, I've learned not to take it personally."