

For 40 years, George O'Hare has been 'all about the kids,' but it's time to step back



From left, George O'Hare of Lowell, Jerry Durkin of Dunstable and George Mahoney of Lowell at the Alternative House Golf Classic in September 2017. SUN FILE PHOTO

By [PRUDENCE BRIGHTON](#) | Sun correspondent

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LOWELL — If you ask anyone who has known George O'Hare about his nearly 40 years in public office, they're likely to say, "It's all about the kids."

O'Hare has said it himself when asked what motivates him. "It's all about the kids," he said in an interview several years ago.

But now O'Hare, at age 83, is stepping back. Health concerns are the reason he will not seek re-election to the Greater Lowell Technical High School Committee this fall.

His daughter, Darragh O'Hare, remembers his time on the Lowell School Committee as well as on the GLTHS board. She was 4 in 1974, when he began the first of five terms on the Lowell board.

That first term was tumultuous and marked by conflict with the school superintendent. He was defeated in the next election, but he was back in 1978. Over the next several years, he was a leader in the construction of the new Lowell High School field house and classrooms.

He lost again in 1987 at another time of tumult for the Lowell board. The school system was under federal mandate to end de facto segregation. It meant the system of neighborhood schools was replaced by school choice, which divided the city into zones.

School choice, which is still in place, gives parents the opportunity to select three preferred schools within their zone. Students are not necessarily assigned to the closest school to them.

As a child and teenager, Darragh O'Hare says she'd hear people talking about him and it was a bit "like being a fly on the wall." She remembers that he knew a lot of people. In fact, she recalls a story about him picking up a rental car in California and hearing someone call, "Hey, George."

He was always looking out for his daughters, Darragh and Susan, but he was also "looking out for the whole community's kids," Darragh O'Hare says.

"He was out there for the betterment of all these kids. He wanted to make sure they grew up to be decent, moral citizens who had respect for themselves. And that's how we were raised," she says.

Mike Lenzi, who owns and operates Lenzi's Catering in Dracut and served with O'Hare for nine years, remembers, "When it came to the students, he was able to separate politics from education. He knew what the kids needed the most and would genuinely celebrate their successes."

He was a strong presence at GLTHS sporting events and awards ceremonies, and, Lenzi added, "he was always aware of records and accomplishments. He supported the staff because he realized they were the driving force behind the potential of each child."

GLTHS Superintendent Jill Davis began teaching at the school at nearly the same time O'Hare joined that board in March 1996. At that time, the City Council and School Committee jointly appointed him to the GLTHS board.

Davis says, "(O'Hare) has been a strong collaborator and communicator in working to do what is best for our students and is sensitive to the diverse needs of all learners."

He was passionate about student learning and vocational education, in addition to budgets, policies and hiring, according to Davis.

Perhaps as a lesson learned from the divisiveness of the Lowell board, O'Hare is credited with bringing the regional board together.

"George helped to nurture a school culture and climate conducive to growth with 23 technical programs and approximately 2,300 students," Davis said.

GLTHS School Committee member Lee Gitschier said, “He kind of galvanized us together.” The board’s votes are not always unanimous, but no one walks away angry, according to Gitschier, who recalls losing a 7-1 vote.

O’Hare’s activities on behalf of kids and the region have not been limited to what he has accomplished at GLTHS. He’s coached or officiated at least three sports: basketball, football and softball. COVID-19 ended these activities.

His dedication to athletics is lifelong. His daughter and Lenzi say he’s a big Celtics fan. “A Celtics lifer,” his daughter calls him.

“He asked me if I would like to split a half-year of Celtics tickets with him. I said, ‘Sure,’” Lenzi said, recounting a story from the first year he was on the board. “The next 17 years I ran up and down the concrete stairs at TD Garden with George’s beers because he forgot his license 17 years in a row! He was a season ticket holder for 40 years. We both loved our Celtics.”

A connection O’Hare made during his time on the Lowell School Committee involved Alternative House through his love of golf. Kathy Kelly served on the committee with him and approached him to run the Alternative House Golf Classic, held annually at Mt. Pleasant Golf Club in the Highlands. He was soon named to that board of directors.

Lenzi has often played golf with him at Long Meadow Golf Club. “As a lefty, he has a tight fade that would get him into trouble often. But he was most enjoyable to play a round of golf with.”

O’Hare has made a quiet impact on the city and region without stirring controversy. As fellow board member Gitschier explains, he uses “common sense” to do it.

His successor on the board will benefit from O’Hare’s ability to bring people together, but whoever that successor is will need lots of “common sense” and commitment to kids to fill some very huge shoes.

The timing of O’Hare’s decision is likely to mean running a sticker campaign this fall to elect his successor this November.