

New battle on school board

■ **In Hempstead**, a claim that member not a citizen

■ **Touré's lawyer** calls the allegation 'racist'

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Hempstead school trustee Maribel Touré, elected in the fall after a fierce campaign battle with longtime board president Betty Cross, is being challenged to prove she is a United States citizen who can hold public office.

The complaint against Touré, a Latina of Mexican heritage, was filed with the school district this week by Cornell Bozier, the former campaign manager for Cross — a fixture on the board whom Touré unseated in an October special election.

That vote was ordered by the state education commissioner after allegations of voter fraud, coercion and misuse of absentee ballots by campaign workers for Cross in the May board election. Cross denied wrongdoing.

Touré and her attorney, Frederick K. Brewington, said they plan to publicly address the question today.

"It's meritless, it's abusive, it's idiotic and it's racist" to question Touré's citizenship, said Brewington, an attorney who focuses on civil rights cases.

The matter may surface at a special school board meeting scheduled tonight at Hempstead High School.

Bozier, 54, said yesterday he filed the complaint because at least one district resident has asked about Touré's citizenship during public comment sessions at school board meetings. He said Touré hasn't answered.

"Being that the residents weren't getting results, I definitely felt that I could," said Bozier, also a Hempstead resident, who said he still is upset about the special election that led to Cross' defeat.

"They made a big to-do about Miss Cross stealing the election, and ultimately it caused her removal," he said. "Now, let's see who stole the election."

District officials did not want to weigh in on the issue. Board President Lamont Johnson, district clerk Patricia Wright and school attorney Austin Graff all declined to comment.

Touré, a longtime Hempstead resident and community advocate, said she hasn't bothered to address the constant questioning because she had better things to focus on.

"We were trying not to pay attention to this nonsense, but we will address it," said Touré, 53. "There are more serious issues in the district to be addressed, and they are wasting their time and my time with this nonsense. I am

a person of integrity. I am not going to be lying or be in a position where I am not supposed to be."

State education law requires that school board members be qualified voters of the district, which would only be possible with U.S. citizenship. Nassau County's voter registration records show Touré is a registered voter in the district.

Much of the complaining at meetings has come from Gypsy Jefferson, 47, a regular attendee who also was upset by Cross' ouster. During the April 15 public comment session, she asked: "Is everyone on the board an American citizen and do they have proof? . . . I have proof Maribel is not."

Jefferson, when asked by a reporter, did not provide proof of her claim. Of Touré not responding to her queries, she said, "She has not showed it and refuses to show it because, you know why, she ain't got it to show."

Touré shouldn't have to prove her citizenship status to all who ask, said Lucas Sánchez, a supporter who is Long Island deputy director of the nonprofit New York Communities for Change, where Touré started her advocacy.

"They are going after the fact that she's a Latina immigrant instead of engaging in dialogue about the issues" in a district that has many academic and management problems, Sánchez said.



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Maribel Touré addresses the Hempstead school board in October. She unseated Betty Cross that month in a special election.



DANIELLE FINKELSTEIN

Cornell Bozier, center, with then Freeport Mayor Andrew Hardwick and Diane Goins at an event in June 2011.