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Stonington Education Association Comes Together to Get Pride Flags Back in Classrooms

Stonington teachers were troubled when they were asked to remove pride flags from their classrooms this fall. These symbols of inclusion had long served as a message to LGBTQ+ students that they were in a safe environment with a teacher they could trust.

Thanks to the strength of their local union, community connections, and a great relationship with the superintendent and board of education, teachers didn't have to wait long to get their flags back—and add on other wins. The Stonington Education Association also succeeded in getting a formal board resolution passed affirming support for LGBTQ+ students and staff and having nondiscrimination language added to teacher and other education staff contracts.

[Above, French teacher Leilani Laroco-Chance and Spanish teacher Jen Stefanowicz, the co-advisors to Stonington High's Alliance for Acceptance, pose with a reinstated pride flag.]

The district initially asked that pride flags be removed after a parent raised concerns that the flags were in violation of a policy against displaying political materials in the classroom. While the district sought a legal opinion, it asked teachers to take down the flags, mostly small stickers on classroom walls or doors.

"Many of the small pride flags displayed in our classrooms were given to teachers by our LGBTQ+ student members of the Alliance for Acceptance, and they highlight the importance of supporting



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all students within the community,” SEA President Michael Freeman said. The SEA maintained that pride flags are not partisan political speech but instead a symbol of acceptance and inclusion.

Distressed by the request to remove the flags, SEA focused its efforts on working toward a positive resolution. Representatives from the SEA requested a meeting with representatives of the Stonington Board of Education, the superintendent, and assistant superintendent and had what Freeman described as thoughtful, constructive dialogue.

It wasn’t just teachers who were bothered by the removal of the pride flags. At a special Board of Education meeting held to discuss the matter, more than 40 community members turned out, with 95% speaking in favor of restoring the flags to classrooms.

Attorney Thomas Mooney, the author of *A Practical Guide to Connecticut School Law*, gave his opinion to the board and superintendent, agreeing with the SEA that pride flags are not political speech. “The pride flag is not associated with a single political party, and its display should not be considered an expression of support for a political party,” Mooney wrote. “Rather, display of the pride flag can fairly be described as support for the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

The superintendent subsequently recommended that the flags go back up, and the board unanimously agreed.

“As educators, we are committed to ensuring equity, diversity, and inclusion,” said Freeman. “We strive to make our classrooms a safe, welcoming learning environment for all of our students, and we must all support efforts to achieve inclusion in our schools. SEA and its members have a deep, long-standing commitment to our students and social rights, and we are dedicated to doing all we can to ensure that our schools are safe, caring environments that help all students reach their full potential.”

At the Board of Education meeting, Stonington graduate Breandan Cullen explained that flags are a sign to queer students that a teacher is safe to confide in.

“It was the only way, originally, that I found this community of people like me and felt supported,” Cullen said. “I’ve grown into the person that I am today because of a teacher who had a little pride flag on her desk that showed me it was safe to talk to her.”

The Board also adopted a resolution drafted by CEA UniServ Representative Chris Teifke declaring that the district is a safe space for students and that it prohibits discrimination and bullying “against all persons, whether student, family/caregiver of a student, or District employee, on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, or the actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression of their associates.”

The SEA used the ordeal to come together as a union and better support LGBTQ+ students and staff. The union organized a fundraiser selling pride flags, enabling more teachers to post pride flags in their classrooms, with the money going to support the high school’s gay-straight alliance.

“The SEA has always worked really closely with this Board of Education, and it was really helpful to have that working relationship to talk out what started as a controversial issue and turned into a positive development,” says Teifke. “Organizing and coming together around this issue have strengthened the association, and I look forward to seeing what they tackle next.”

Rather than waiting for issues to arise in your local association, Teifke recommends being proactive. “My hope is that no other local would have to go through something like this, but it was clear to me that because Stonington had already been proactive on these types of issues, that really helped when something like this turned up. They weren’t just reacting but continuing with the groundwork that had already been laid.”

To insulate against attacks, Teifke says to make sure there’s an active gay-straight alliance in your school district and that you have community support. He adds, “Looking back, I don’t think we needed to wait until an attack to get a nondiscrimination resolution passed by the Board of Education or get language in the contract. Being proactive is the right way to do things.”

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