

WINNING SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS 2024



EDUCATION VOTES

PRE ATTENDANCE HANDOUTS

Organizers must distinguish between worksite and local political campaigns, with school board elections having a significant impact on public school employees. To win, they need to develop strong leaders and build relationships with external groups, while also mobilizing voters and finding candidates, using member engagement plans, and exploring best practices.

The NEA Center for Organizing and Affiliate Support in partnership with the NEA Campaigns and Elections department created a training designed to build participants' understanding of political campaigns that increases the power and organizing capacity of their locals and community. Participants will deepen their understanding of campaign planning, candidate recruitment, coalition building, PAC fundraising, member engagement, voter contact, and messaging.

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Why pre-attendance reading?

The resources compiled here are short, relevant, and intended to help you shift from the day-to-day cognitive load of work to the thinking you will use as a learner at the academy. We rely on a number of popular education strategies that involve the use of texts and scenarios for group work. Many participants find it difficult to do a “first read” in the classroom so we have provided those items here in case you would like to review them.

Read and Reflect: (Please Do Before Arriving)

Please take the time before arriving to read our community agreements on pages 3-4. We will engage you in a discussion at the very start of our time together around these agreements and your commitment to them.

Resources for Group Work: (Please Do Before Arriving)

The resources on pages 5-28 are for group work. Below is a table with your specifically assigned article. Please read that one thoroughly and be familiar with the others. BRING THESE WITH YOU AS THEY WILL NOT BE PART OF THE ATTENDANCE PACKAGE

Articles for Thinking: (Optional Food for Thought)

The resources included on pages 29-92 are primarily designed to help frame “why” we are offering this academy. It is a number of articles about a school board election in Pennsylvania.

Name		Assigned Article
Barbara	Antonetti	Colorado
Sandy	Arseneault	1776 Project
Lindsay	Bova	Mom’s for Liberty
Timothy	Couch	Time Article
Kristi	Critchlow	Philadelphia Inquirer Article
Jim	Croad	Colorado
Gregory	D'Aguiar	1776 Project
Michael	DeVries	Mom’s for Liberty
Jake	Dominello	Time Article
Anna	Dougherty	Philadelphia Inquirer Article
Mark	Halls	Colorado
Kristien	Hamilton	1776 Project
Amanda	Jennings	Mom’s for Liberty
Nicole	Joyce	Time Article
Dominique	Lee	Philadelphia Inquirer Article
Deb	Lotan	Colorado
Alex	Lucini	1776 Project
Maria	Martinez	Mom’s for Liberty
Brittany	McCoy	Time Article
Amanda	Menas	Philadelphia Inquirer Article
Sandy	Miller	Colorado
Jose	Perez	1776 Project
Debora	Porter	Mom’s for Liberty
Zach	Roberts	Time Article
Scott	Rude	Philadelphia Inquirer Article
Rick	Scalf	Colorado
Linda	Sieck	1776 Project
Alene	Smith	Mom’s for Liberty
Sue Ellen	Sopher	Time Article
Lauren	Tice Miller	Philadelphia Inquirer Article
Anita	Vernon	Colorado

Community Agreements for Our Time

Awareness and Self-Knowledge

This requires self-knowledge and self-awareness. Self-knowledge allows you to see what causes you pain and conflict and enables you to embrace your contradictions and inconsistencies. It allows the space to work on things about yourself that you are not happy with. In turn, self-knowledge helps to prevent you from projecting your negative aspects onto other people. Bringing your best self also requires that you have a positive attitude, are willing to deeply explore your perspectives and remain open to the perspectives and experiences of others.

Listening for Understanding

Be an active listener. Active listening involves paying full and careful attention to the other person, looking him or her in the eye, avoiding interruptions, reflecting your understanding, clarifying information, summarizing the other person's perspectives and sharing your own. Remember that most people need time to open up and might not be willing to immediately share their personal stories, hopes, fears and/or concerns.

Being Gracious

Being kind is a vital way of bringing meaning to our own lives, as well as the lives of others. Kindness is about caring genuinely for others around you, wanting the best for them and recognizing in them the same wants, needs, aspirations and even fears that you may have. Being kind and generous allows us to communicate better with others, to be more self-compassionate and to be a positive force in other people's lives. We are gracious when we accept and genuinely work to use the pronouns that others ask us to use. Being gracious includes following the COVID protocols that are in place to protect the health of this learning community.

Staying Engaged

Staying engaged requires you to be morally, emotionally, intellectually and socially involved in the conversation. Staying engaged means that you are listening with curiosity and willing to deepen your understanding. Staying engaged might also require you to sustain the conversation even when it gets uncomfortable or diverted. This means a commitment to keeping your electronic communications to a minimum with folks not present in this learning community. This also means being present for all portions of the learning agenda.

Being Open and Suspending Judgment

Listening with an open mind includes being receptive to the influence of others. You can suspend judgment by becoming aware of preconceived notions and listening to everything someone has to say before jumping to conclusions. Most importantly, suspending judgment also means listening to what the speaker has to say for understanding, not just to determine whether the speaker is right or wrong. This means that we recognize each of us will make mistakes and that we have the capacity to grow. We should expect imperfections.

Saying "I"- tell your truth

Speaking your truth in authentic and courageous conversations about race and other issues where experiences/perspectives may differ widely from yours requires a willingness to take risks. It means that you will be absolutely honest and candid about your own thoughts, feelings, experiences and opinions and not just saying what you perceive others want to hear. Speaking your truth will require you to speak from the "first person" and use "I" statements.

Seeking Discomfort

Leaning in to discomfort will require you to let go of understandings and stereotypes that you may be holding onto in order to move forward. Leaning in means that you will avoid pre-judgment and be open to the kernel of wisdom in each individual's experiences. Leaning in to discomfort will require you to sit through moments of embarrassment, confusion, anxiety, and/or fear.

Reaching Empathy

Empathy and compassion allow you to understand the other person's point of view. When you are empathetic, you are more understanding, patient and kind. Expanding your capacity to feel empathy will also allow others to enter your circle of human concern. Sharing, using, and respecting pronouns is a very simple form of empathy.

Expecting Non-Resolution and Non-Closure

Expect and accept that there may not be closure. It is not likely that you will resolve your personal understanding about race or another person's racial experience in a single conversation. The more you talk about race or other issues with another person, the more you learn and the more they will learn. Authentic and productive conversations about race and other issues where experiences/perspectives may differ widely from yours are continuous and always evolving. This means that sometimes we will have unfinished, unexplored, and shortened conversations about some concepts.

**Adapted from "Embracing equity and inclusion", Annie E. Casey Foundation*

What questions do you want to ask about any of the ideas in these agreements?

What additional agreements do you need in order to be a fully participating member of our learning community?

Can you commit to these agreements? IF not, what would it take for you to be able to commit?

COLORADO TIMES RECORDER

Leadership Institute Training: Action Items for Newly Conservative School Boards

By [Heidi Beedle](#) posted on November 13, 2023

This weekend, approximately 30 school board members, activists, and engaged citizens attended the Leadership Institute's School Board and Education Policy Summit at the Colorado Springs Marriott. Founded in 1979 by Morton C. Blackwell, the conservative activist who was the youngest delegate for Barry Goldwater in 1964 and served as special assistant to Ronald Reagan, the Leadership Institute is an "explicitly conservative" 501(c)3 nonprofit that conducts a variety of political trainings across the country.

The event kicked off Friday with a panel discussion featuring Holly Horn, the Douglas County political operative who has served as campaign manager for U.S. Rep. Ken Buck (R-CO), 18th Judicial District Attorney John Kellner's failed attorney general bid, and [most recently for conservative school board candidates in Cherry Creek and Douglas County school districts](#). Horn is also the deputy director for the [Leadership Institute's Grassroots program in Colorado](#).

"I take trainings of all types to places around the country with the Leadership Institute, but I'm also trying to build a program for us here Colorado," said Horn. "Leadership Institute has not been present in Colorado for the last four to five years, and so we're so glad to be back."

Saturday's events included a crash-course in campaigning from the Leadership Institute's Byron Clark, a Florida-based educator with experience running successful school board campaigns in Kansas. Clark's session included suggestions on everything from building effective coalitions and networking with activist groups, such as Moms for Liberty, to developing effective platforms and slogans and managing social media and

messaging. Clark also provided suggestions for how to use campaign volunteers and activists to further policy goals after taking office.



Mische at the 2023 Truth and Liberty conference.

The afternoon session was presented by Ted Mische, who serves as the [public/private partnership liaison for Woodland Park Superintendent Ken Witt's ERBOCES](#), and is the trainer for the [Truth and Liberty Coalition's "Candidate Academy."](#) Mische provided a list of priorities for the attendees — among whom was [Academy School District 20 board member and Woodland Park School District chief operations officer Aaron Salt](#) — a list of priorities after achieving a conservative majority in a school district.

"The first really important thing that all board members need to consider is their superintendent," said Mische. "Is that superintendent on board? Do they want what you want? If they don't, then you need to replace them. Either you need to retrain them, get them thinking the way you're thinking, or you need to replace them. That is not an easy thing to do to replace a superintendent. If you do, you're going to get a lot of flak from the left."

After a conservative majority was elected to Colorado Springs School District 11's board in 2021, [then-superintendent Michael Thomas was replaced by Michael Gaal](#), after

Thomas stepped down due to “the political divisions, public meltdowns and fighting,” according to reporting from the *Colorado Springs Independent*.

“Finding new superintendents is very difficult — conservative ones anyway,” warned Mische. “Only about one in ten nationally is conservative, and as we take school boards across the country, there are going to be fewer and fewer of those. The universities are very, very leftist, very progressive. They are not turning out new conservatives. They are only turning out leftists. So what do we do? Well, there’s a number of different ways to find solutions. One is there are still a handful of conservative universities. There are Christian universities that are usually conservative.”

Mische also suggested hiring ideologically-aligned superintendents over those with experience in education. “We don’t necessarily have to have people in education,” he said. “It’s good if they have a background, but they don’t have to have that background. So business leaders, CEOs who bring in a business perspective into the school districts, because school districts should be run to some degree as a business for saving money — really looking at that money carefully. We can also use military officers, generals who have a lot of experience managing huge organizations and lots of people. There’ll be a learning curve for them. Both of those don’t know a whole lot about education. They’ll have to learn. The question is — you have to make the choice — is that background in education more important than their mindset?”

Activists in Woodland Park raised concerns over Witt’s appointment as superintendent, [noting in an online petition that](#), “Ken Witt is underqualified to be a superintendent for our district. He graduated from the University of Colorado Denver with a bachelor’s degree in Mathematics. He does not hold any qualifications for being a superintendent and has minimal experience with students, other than making schools less of a place for education and more of a place for business.”

After replacing the superintendent, Mische recommended that new boards also replace the district’s legal counsel. “After you look at the superintendent, then you need to look at the school district’s attorney,” he said. “Most school district attorneys are very progressive. They will not help you. They will stop you from doing the things you need to

do. You can have a majority board, but if you don't have a superintendent and a [school] district attorney who is on your side you will get nothing done."

A vast majority of conservative school districts and charter schools in Colorado are represented by [attorney Brad Miller](#). Both Mische and Miller are [graduates of the Leadership Program of the Rockies](#).

Mische also suggested that new majority conservative boards wait to be sworn into their new positions, in order to collaborate privately without violating Colorado Open Meeting Laws. "Try to make those decisions long before you're elected, but certainly before you're sworn in and swear-in date is really, really important," he said. "By law, you have to be sworn in within 10 days after the election is certified. You can push that back. That's in Colorado. Different states are different, but in Colorado, within 10 days after the election is certified. Oftentimes, especially if you're working with a very liberal district, they're going to tell you you have to be sworn in right away, sometimes within a week of being elected. You don't in Colorado, you can push that date back, and you should if you have a majority. If you're a minority, it doesn't matter so much because you can't make any significant changes anyway, but if you have a majority, you want to push that date back so you have more time to speak to each other."

After replacing the district superintendent and attorney, Mische suggested boards work to weaken unions in their districts. "Teachers unions are our opposition, unfortunately, with regards to the campaigns," he said. "So what can we do? We can defund them. Right. There's a couple different ways to defund the teachers union. And we're doing this and I've seen multiple districts that are doing this. One is you give them an alternative."

The alternatives Mische proposed are groups like the Professional Association of Colorado Educators, which has been pushed by [education conspiracist Deborah Flora](#), and Christian Educators.

“They also provide \$2 million worth of liability insurance for \$20 a month from a Christian perspective, and they get Christians legal protections,” said Mische. “If there’s religious issues happening in the schools, they’ll protect them from that perspective.”

Conservative districts in Colorado Springs, District 11, District 49 and District 20, [all received letters from the Freedom From Religion Foundation in 2022](#) for allegedly violating the separation of church and state.

Mische also suggested conservative boards end payroll deductions for union dues. “The second way is, in almost every school district, the school district does a direct deposit of the teachers union dues, so that teachers never see the money in their paycheck,” he said. “For the most part, it goes directly from the district to the unions, and the teachers never write a check. They have no idea how much money is being taken from them every month or every year. So what we can do if we’re elected and we have a majority is we stop doing that. The teachers actually write the check and every single month they will leave. They will leave the teachers union when they see how much money they have to pay in.”

Should changing the superintendent, attorney, and interfering with union activity prove unpopular, Mische suggests making changes to the district’s communications team. “Once you flip that board, the left is coming at you like you would not believe,” he said. “You have to have somebody who is exceptional with communications, somebody who has experience in it and hiring full time because you’re going to need it and person is going to push back on all the negativity that comes towards the district and they’re going to present positive things and things that you as a board are accomplishing on a regular basis, at least twice a week, sending out information either through social media or through the regular media as well. But make sure that information is getting out there. Oftentimes what I see in school boards, conservatives get elected, they do fantastic work, and the public has no idea what they’re doing.”

Prior this year’s elections, Colorado Springs School District 11 gave [a sole-sourced, \\$40,000 contract to Tsogt Research and Consulting](#), a company that has only existed in Colorado since April 7, 2023. The registered agent for the company, Michael Tsogt,

graduated from the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs in 2022 with a political science degree and was a Koch fellow in 2019.

In Academy School District 20, [activists in a leaked Discord chat](#) urged then-candidates Derrick Willburn and Amy Shandy to “fire Allison Cortez [D20’s Chief Communications Officer] and Tanya Thompson [D20’s general counsel].”

Mische also urged new board members to cultivate a network of conservative informants amongst the district faculty. “Conservative teachers are in the closet and they don’t want to come out,” he said. “They’re scared, but those are the ones we need to work with. We need to find out who they are. We need to get them to report what’s happening in the classrooms and in the hallways and what other teachers are doing. If it’s bad. If it’s not bad, then good, things are going well, but we have to have those things reported to the board members so the board members can make those changes.”

Should these tactics lead to contentious public comment sessions during board meetings, Mische assured the audience not to worry. “It is not really the public,” he said. “These are paid activists.”

The Guardian

The Moms for Liberty platform is extreme – and most voters are loudly rejecting it

This article is more than 2 months old

[*Katrina vanden Heuvel*](#)

The failure of rightwing ideologues to take over local school boards shows that voters simply won't get behind them



Moms for Liberty founders Tiffany Justice and Tina Descovich give opening remarks during its inaugural summit on 15 July 2022 in Tampa, Florida. Photograph: Octavio Jones/Getty Images

Off-year elections, like the ones that took place earlier this month, can fall

under the radar – or at least, that's what far-right reactionary groups like Moms for Liberty and the 1776 Project might have been hoping. Organizations like these spent the better part of this year pushing to elect school board members who would enact a rightwing agenda in the name of "abolishing critical race theory".

But, for the most part, they failed. Per the American Federation of Teachers, groups like these lost [close to 70% of the races](#) where they made endorsements this November. And while conservatives made some inroads in places like the [Houston suburbs](#), they fell short in some of the most high-profile races in swing states, like Pennsylvania – where Democrats [swept several school boards](#) while rejecting the culture war – as well as [Iowa](#), [Ohio](#) and [Virginia](#).

The failure of rightwing ideologues to take over local school boards shows that voters simply don't want to buy what they're selling. As Keenan Crow of LGBTQ+ organization One Iowa Action [said](#): “There is a basic decency left in the electorate that recognizes that every kid deserves a safe, inclusive space to learn.” And as the countdown to 2024 begins in earnest, progressives could benefit from embracing that decency in school board battles and beyond.

Moms for Liberty was formed in 2021 to oppose [Covid-19 restrictions](#) in schools, like mask requirements and vaccine mandates. Supercharged by funding from national conservative organizations like the [Heritage Foundation](#), it has since expanded its mission to include fighting school “wokeness” – otherwise known as “acknowledgment that racism exists” – and touting “parental rights” as their justification for [trying to privatize the public school system](#).

As I [wrote in September](#), they are one of the organizations behind the latest wave of book bans across the United States. The pastor who leads their Philadelphia faith-based outreach was [recently outed as a registered sex offender](#); he has resigned as a city ward leader, but remains a Moms for Liberty member. The Southern Poverty Law Center categorized Moms for Liberty as an [extremist group](#) earlier this year – and that was before an Indiana chapter opened a newsletter by literally [quoting Hitler](#).

The group has generous funding and chapters in [almost every state](#). It has mainstream Republican support; former president Donald Trump, plus four other 2024 GOP also-rans, [spoke at a Moms for Liberty summit](#) in Philadelphia this summer.

So why did they perform so poorly? For one thing, the Moms for Liberty agenda was simply too extreme for most voters outside of the deepest-red districts. [National polling](#) from earlier this year found that the majority of Americans oppose book bans, trust teachers to make curricular decisions, and think schools should teach the history of slavery, racism and segregation.

This dynamic was reflected in the repudiation of figures like Teri Patrick – a school board candidate in West Des Moines, Iowa, who once fought to [criminally charge](#) a school district because its library had two books about LGBTQ+ issues. Patrick was endorsed by Moms for Liberty but crushed in the election, receiving a measly [9% of the vote](#).

For all the fear-mongering about the woke mind virus infiltrating our schools, millions of parents across the country trust, respect and admire their children's teachers

As well-organized as Moms for Liberty may be, teachers unions are organized better. In Iowa, more than [85% of candidates endorsed by the local teachers union](#), the Iowa State Education Association, won a seat in the 7 November school board elections. On the same night, only one of the 13 candidates endorsed by Moms for Liberty was elected. Moms for Liberty founder Tina Descovich herself partially blamed the [strength of teachers unions](#) for their recent losses.

If anything, the intense attention and resources that the right gave to school board races only motivated the labor movement to match those efforts. Last summer, American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten [said](#) that Moms for Liberty has “created more action and more energy” within unions.

When a group of concerned parents in the small suburb of Madeira, Ohio, saw the campaign materials being shared by Moms for Liberty, they formed their own Pac, [Madeira United](#), and communicated a simple message: “No culture wars. No extremism”. On 7 November, their nonpartisan candidates prevailed.

For all the fear-mongering about the woke mind virus infiltrating our schools, millions of parents across the country trust, respect and admire their children’s teachers. This month’s election results ought to be a wake-up call: progressives can still win the education debate, but it will take full-throated support and organizing of teachers and their unions.

Conservatives aren’t giving up this fight any time soon. Shortly after the election, the Leadership Institute hosted a training in Colorado to plot next steps for the rightwing board members who were successfully elected. And just last week, Moms for Liberty’s Oklahoma chapter called for the deplatforming of an institution that they say is “largely focused on indoctrinating youth with radical viewpoints and sexual ideologies”. You guessed it: they’re talking about the Scholastic Book Fair.

But between teachers unions, enterprising parents, progressive leaders across the country, and an enduring majority of voters, there remains a robust national coalition that favors a pluralistic education system. [As Weingarten said shortly after the election](#): “These results underline what families have been telling us for the last two years: They don’t want culture wars; they want safe and welcoming public schools ... They reject division and want to seize the future together.”

TIME

Parents Should Have a Voice in Their Kids' Education But We've Gone Too Far



An even mix of proponents and opponents to teaching Critical Race Theory are in attendance as the Placentia Yorba Linda School Board discusses a proposed resolution to ban it from being taught in schools. November 2021 Robert Gauthier-Los Angeles Times

BY [SUZANNE NOSSEL](#) SEPTEMBER 20, 2022 3:11 PM EDT
Nossel is the chief executive officer of PEN America, a human rights and free expression organization, and she is author of [Dare to Speak: Defending Free Speech for All](#)

As kids return to school, the focus on math, science, and [reading](#) has been sidelined by campaigns mounted in the name of “parents’ rights.” Advocates are demanding that books be banned from curricula and school libraries, targeting teachers and administrators based on viewpoints, and fighting for control of education boards. There is no question that parents deserve a say in shaping their children’s educations; they have moral and legal responsibility for their children, and the freedom to make

fundamental decisions for their families. But the rallying cry of “parents’ rights” is being wielded to do far more than give parents their rightful voice. It is turning public schools into political battlegrounds, fracturing communities, and diverting time and energy away from teaching and learning.

I have two children, a 2022 public school graduate and an incoming high school sophomore. I have opinions on what happens in the classroom and I have made myself heard. When my son was uncomfortable being asked to sing religious songs for an elementary school holiday show, we objected to the music teacher. During Covid, I was alarmed by how much in-person learning my kids were missing and registered my views vociferously with school leaders.

But the current parents’ rights movement goes well beyond the usual channels of dialogue between families and schools—parent-teacher conferences, PTA meetings, and calls to the principal. The movement is an organized, nationwide effort waged by advocacy groups, including Moms for Liberty, the Parental Rights Foundation, and No Left Turn in Education. Their aim is to activate parents to contest what is taught in the classroom, what books are available to students, and the professional authority of teachers, administrators, and librarians to carry out their work. This campaign goes well beyond a judicious effort to prompt reconsideration of controversial aspects of certain school curricula or questions of the age-appropriateness of certain materials and narratives. Rather, its methods center on censorship and are chilling speech in classrooms across the country.

In Alpine, Utah, in August, 52 books, including Judy Blume’s *Forever* and Jodi Picoult’s *Nineteen Minutes*, were [pulled from school library shelves](#) after an “internal audit” initiated by the school board determined that they contained “sensitive material” and lacked “literary merit.” After an outcry, the district pulled back slightly, limiting access to the targeted books to students whose parents “opt-in” and making them available to their kids. In Florida, Missouri, Georgia, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and other states, campaigns have spurred the passage of new laws to limit the availability of books in schools, sometimes under penalty of steep fines for teachers or punishments for librarians. PEN America, the organization I lead, has documented more than 2,500 book removals in the nine months between July 2021 and June 2022 in our [new report](#).

The accelerating pace of book bans across the country might suggest that such measures are popular. But surveys show that upwards of [70% of Americans](#), including both Democrats and Republicans, oppose these bans; a 2022 [Harris poll](#) revealed just 12% of respondents favor banning books on “divisive topics.” In the name of

vindicating their “rights,” parents with special interests are pursuing tactics that the overwhelming majority of parents and citizens reject.

The origins of the parental-rights movement reveal why its new focus on restricting school curricula and reading lists is so distorted and counterproductive. The driving force behind the Parental Rights Foundation, Michael P. Farris, was an architect of the homeschooling movement, advocating for parents who wished to educate their children privately, at home. Homeschooling won adherents in the 1970s and ’80s as court rulings, including in a 1986 Tennessee case in which Farris was an attorney, rejected parents’ efforts to get certain books – including *Macbeth* – removed from the curriculum on the grounds that they offended families’ religious beliefs. When these litigants failed to enlist the support of courts to impose their religious preferences in public school classrooms, Farris and his allies shifted tactics, seeking to be “left alone by the government” to educate their children as they saw fit.

The new efforts of the past year represent a return to Farris’s original approach. In 2007, Farris launched ParentalRights.org, a group that is now at the forefront of mobilizing parents against what its website describes as [“‘expert’ agents of the state,”](#) namely teachers, librarians, and principals. ParentalRights.org’s current President, Will Estrada, has celebrated the movement’s rising influence, saying: [“We’ve been speaking into the void,” whereas now, “suddenly everyone cares about parental rights.”](#)

ParentalRights.org played a key organizing role in passing “Parents’ Bill of Rights” laws in Florida (2021) and Georgia (2022), which impose heavy administrative burdens on teachers, make it easier for individual parents to challenge curricular materials for all students in a school district, and target LGBTQ+ affirming practices. Many similar bills have been proposed in other states, and may well become law next year.

Perhaps more significantly, the parental rights rhetoric championed by Farris has become a staple of some conservative attacks on public education. At a conference of the conservative Moms for Liberty in July, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis spoke about the importance of parents being able to [challenge the books available at schools.](#) The conference included a session on [“Gender Ideology in Our Schools.”](#) A movement that for years styled sought to *prevent* the government from controlling how they educated their own children now seeks to *decree* what entire student bodies and school districts can and cannot learn and read. The rhetoric of parents’ rights has morphed from a movement aimed at constraining the power of government over education to one that is mobilizing politicians and legislatures to extend the heavy hand of the government into the classroom.

PEN America's [most recent report](#) on book bans documented how groups organizing under the banner of parental rights curate and publicize lists of books that they view as “indoctrination,” present those lists to district officials, and then administrators remove the challenged books from school shelves. Established processes for reviewing challenged books objectively to determine if concerns are founded are swept aside as books are banned wholesale. The report found that proposed or enacted legislation as well as political pressure from lawmakers played a direct role in over 1100 bans across the country, or at least 40 percent of the bans. Spontaneous, sweeping book bans have become an alarming new norm, in which titles are removed at the slightest sign of complaint from parents or lawmakers.

As stakeholders in the school system and simply as citizens, parents should participate in deciding how schools are run. Their voices deserve to be heard alongside the expert judgment of principals, teachers, and librarians. But to use legislation and mandates to declare certain stories and ideas off-limits violates the compact underpinning public education. Parents who opt for public schools, rather than private academies or homeschooling, are signing up for a system designed to serve entire communities and general interests; they are pooling their resources with other families to raise future generations. It is one thing to believe that parents have the right to forego regular schooling in favor of imparting an individual belief system to children at home; it is quite another to insist that public school curricula and libraries be remade to match those predilections.

These tactics also risk denying and defeating children's own sense of educational and intellectual agency. Efforts by parents to dictate what books their teens read and subjects they study stand in the way of allowing children to develop the autonomy and judgment they will need in adulthood. Schools should breed critical thinking such that no book or lesson has the power to indoctrinate a worldview. A major purpose of a library, a broad curriculum, and of the protection of free speech itself is the notion that exposure to the panoply of available ideas and narratives is what enables us to form and test our own opinions and beliefs.

The same tensions provoking these battles are also roiling society more broadly. Social and generational shifts in thinking about racial justice, sexual orientation, and gender identity have stoked concerns in some quarters about how marriages, families, and society at large may be changing in unrecognizable, irreversible ways. The impulse of parents to shield their children from what seem like alien social forces and values is age-old. The challenge is compounded in an era in which traditional geographic boundaries that demarcated communities are eroded by online platforms that make traditional controls on what children see, hear and know virtually impossible to enforce. Some parents who find themselves raising children in an

information ecosystem run amok have sought to more aggressively police the arenas they can control, training their sights on the public school classroom and library. Self-proclaimed parents' rights organizations play on those fears. They have turned their backs on time-honored modes of dialogue and partnership between parents and schools, stoking the belief that the threats they perceive demand government intrusion. In some communities, frustration over pandemic school closures and learning loss has bred resentment and distrust of administrators and teachers, fueling confrontational approaches. The American Federation of Teachers has reported a precipitous jump in the number of educators quitting their jobs over the last year. Meanwhile, children, who suffered learning loss and mental health challenges during the pandemic, find themselves in school environments wracked by tension, where their own rights and interests are often an afterthought.

In an era of intensifying polarization and fragmentation, public schools are among the few unifying institutions with the potential to help solder together a diverse rising generation of Americans ready and equipped to live together, solve problems and help build a better nation. If parents are worried about the books their children may find in school, they can speak to a teacher or librarian, and—even more importantly—engage with their child about the values and stories they wish to emphasize. The phrase “parents’ rights” may have a nice ring to it, but the agenda now afoot in its name should sound alarms for all those who care about the future of public education.

Correction, September 20: The original version of this story misstated Michael Farris’s role in a 1986 lawsuit. He was an attorney, not the plaintiff.

The Philadelphia Inquirer

What is Parents Defending Education, the group accusing Lower Merion of discrimination?

Parents Defending Education has been filing complaints across the country, saying it's "fighting indoctrination in the classroom." Here's some background on the organization.



Buses leave Lower Merion High School in Ardmore on Dec. 9, 2020. This week the district was targeted by a national group that has been challenging school equity initiatives across the country. MONICA HERNDON / Staff Photographer

by [Maddie Hanna](#)

Published Feb. 2, 2023, 5:14 p.m. ET

The Lower Merion School District has offered affinity groups for students of color for more than a decade. But this week, those programs — which the district says are designed to boost

achievement and give students a “safe space to engage in conversations” — came under fire from a national group that has been challenging school equity initiatives across the country.

Parents Defending Education says it filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights, accusing the Montgomery County district of racial discrimination through the affinity groups and its cultural competency lessons for students. (The district said it “[strongly disagrees](#)” with the group’s characterization.)

While it’s unclear why the group trained its sights on Lower Merion — no district students or families are mentioned in the complaint — Parents Defending Education has been filing similar complaints across the country, saying it’s “fighting indoctrination in the classroom.” Here’s some background on the organization:

How did Parents Defending Education start?

The group announced its launch in March 2021 and incorporated in Arlington, Va., later that year amid [heated disagreement around pandemic school closures](#) and a mounting [campaign by conservatives against critical race theory](#) that began to [dominate local school board meetings](#).

Announcing its launch, Parents Defending Education said it would “[begin reclaiming our K-12 schools](#) from political activists and extremists,” as it denounced “wokeism” and “the cult of antiracism.”

Who’s behind the group?

Parents Defending Education describes itself as a “national grassroots organization,” though it has ties to conservative advocacy groups and media. Its founder and president, Nicole Neily, previously worked for the Cato Institute think tank and the Independent Women’s Forum, a conservative nonprofit focused on economic issues, and founded a group called Speech First, which has [sued colleges over anti-bias policies](#) that it says infringe on students’ free-speech rights. Its vice president, Caroline Moore, has worked for the Federalist Society, a conservative legal organization, and the Mercatus Center, a libertarian think tank.

Among those who have served on the organization’s board is [Karol Markowicz](#), a columnist for the New York Post and Fox News. Media Matters for America, a liberal website that obtained the group’s IRS filing seeking tax-exempt status, [listed another board director](#) as Edward Blum, the founder of Students for Fair Admissions, which sued Harvard University and the University of North Carolina [challenging affirmative action policies](#) in a case heard last year by the U.S. Supreme Court. (Parents for Defending Education filed [an amicus brief](#) supporting the challenge.)

How much money is it spending?

As a 501(c)3 charitable organization, the group is required to file with the IRS. However, because it incorporated in 2021, tax forms aren’t yet available through public search tools. The group did not respond to a request Thursday to share its filings.

According to [a report](#) by Maurice Cunningham, a retired associate professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts at Boston who says he received a copy of the group's 2021 tax filing, the group received more than \$3 million in contributions and grants that year.

A spokesperson for Parents Defending Education did not respond to a question Thursday about the group's donors.

Is the group targeting other Pennsylvania schools?

The group didn't address a question about whether it had filed other complaints against Pennsylvania schools.

On its "[IndoctriNation Map](#)," however, the group lists 30 "incidents" in Pennsylvania, including administrative regulations discussed last month by the Upper Moreland School Board [regarding transgender and gender diverse students](#), and [a diversity, equity, and inclusion calendar](#) promoted on social media by an elementary school in the Upper Dublin School District that included "Transgender Day of Remembrance, memorializing those killed due to anti-transgender prejudice."

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Neily, in an interview Wednesday, said most of the information the group receives comes through tips.

"We have parents, grandparents, people who see articles in their local newspaper," she said. She said most people submit anonymously because they "fear retaliation."

What are affinity groups?

Some schools offer affinity groups for students or teachers of color who are minorities in their school communities. The intent, proponents say, is [to create a supportive space](#) to share concerns and experiences. Lower Merion says that two of its high school programs for students of color — Becton Scholars and POWER Scholars — "help cultivate academic excellence and leadership."

In [objecting to the groups](#), Parents Defending Education says they "teach children that our sameness and our differences are found in our immutable traits like skin color" and may violate the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause.

Where else is Parents Defending Education targeting?

In January, the group filed complaints against education agencies in Portland, Maine, Santa Cruz, Calif., Shelburne, Vt., and Ashland, Ore., alleging discrimination based on racial affinity groups.

Neily said the Office of Civil Rights has launched investigations into similar complaints the group filed against schools in New York and South Carolina. The office still needs to decide whether to investigate the complaint against Lower Merion.

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In [a fact sheet](#) published Tuesday — the same day the Lower Merion complaint was filed — the office said that “activities intended, in whole or in part, to further objectives such as diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion are not generally or categorically prohibited” under the Civil Rights Act.

It also said that “determining whether an activity or program of a school or college — including diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts — results in prohibited Title VI discrimination requires assessing the totality of the circumstances in each particular case.”

Parents Defending Education settled a lawsuit last year with the Wellesley School District in suburban Boston, where it had also challenged racial affinity groups created as part of a diversity, equity and inclusion plan. Wellesley [agreed to make the groups open to all students](#), according to the Associated Press. In that case, Parents Defending Education represented parents who said their children were “highly conscious of race during their interactions with their teachers and fellow classmates” and felt “they were part of the ‘problem’ solely because of their skin color.”

In its complaint against Lower Merion, the group cited [a 2015 decision by the Office of Civil Rights](#) finding that a suburban Chicago high school erred in hosting a “Black Lives Matter” assembly specifically for Black students to talk about their experiences. The district agreed that all programs and activities would be open to students of all races going forward.

Staff writer Ryan W. Briggs contributed to this article.



These PACS are funding 'parents' rights advocates' running for local school board positions

[Erin Mansfield](#)[Kayla Jimenez](#) USA TODAY

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Across the country, new right-leaning [political action committees](#) are pouring money into school board races, [aiming to flip control of who governs schools](#) in favor of self-proclaimed parents rights advocates in a way that rivals the role that [teachers unions](#) have historically had in these contests.

For much less than [what it would cost them to influence a seat in the House or Senate](#), these PACs are putting thousands of dollars at a time – sometimes just hundreds – into races for local school boards and as a result, changing education on a national scale.

A super PAC called the 1776 Project PAC is leading the way, emphasizing opposition to lessons related to racial and social justice. With a war chest smaller than what some congressional candidates in competitive districts are raising, the group has supported and opposed school board candidates in a dozen states.

Political action committees, or PACs, and super PACs pool donations from many different people and entities and use that money to try to elect candidates who represent their interests. They may be registered at the federal or state level.

Ian Vandewalker, senior counsel for the democracy program at New York University's Brennan Center for Justice, said the involvement of these major PACs in local elections is a sign that politics at large have become nationalized and more partisan.

"This sort of hyper-partisan, disinformation-based electioneering seems to be happening at all levels now," Vandewalker said.

Other PACs are focusing on specific states and races. A grocery store heiress is behind a PAC spending to influence school board races across the state of Florida, and a federal PAC that typically focuses on federal policy got involved in one Florida county. In Texas, a PAC is raising big money to flip school board seats statewide.

Candidates with the most money in their campaign accounts tend to be the ones who win. [Analyses by the watchdog group Open Secrets](#) have regularly shown that the House and Senate candidates with the most money tend to win.

At the school board level, that effect has the potential to be larger because the races are often so cheap.

In a 2018 [survey by the National School Boards Association](#), 75 percent of respondents said they spent less than \$1,000 on their election; 16 percent said they spent between \$1,000 and \$5,000; and only 9 percent said they spent more than \$5,000. Most stayed in their positions for long periods of time, and most were volunteers. A recent study from the group School Board Partners showed a changing picture.

The influence of these PACs is sweeping: In an election season that at the national level is considered a referendum on whether Democratic President Joe Biden's party should keep its majority in the House and Senate, Nov. 8 ballots in more than two dozen states will also contain school board races.

A nationwide effort to change the classroom

The 1776 Project PAC, started by a longtime Republican campaign operative and named in response to [The New York Times's 1619 Project](#), is one of the main forces upending that longtime trend. The 1619 Project frames slavery and the contributions of Black Americans as central to American history.

The group's main focus has been to ban the teaching of what they call critical race theory — a graduate-level legal theory that is not taught in public schools — but in reality the group targets almost any teaching about racism and diversity. The group also dabbles in attacking topics related to transgender rights.

“Radical left-wing ideologues want to lock parents out of the classroom as they teach their children they can be a different gender and then take their kids away from them if they object to it,” the PAC [wrote on its Twitter account](#) this month. “We will stop at nothing to remove this crap from our schools.”

Half of the money the 1776 Project PAC has raised — \$1.5 million out of \$3 million — came from people giving less than \$200, according to Federal Election Commission filings. Ryan Girdusky, the group's founder, pointed to the more than 40,000 people who have donated to his PAC.

The largest single donation, \$900,000, came from Restoration PAC, a fund backed by billionaire Richard Uihlein that says it wants to bring the country back to its “timeless foundation” of “turning to God and the enforcement of just laws.”

Uihlein and [Restoration PAC](#) also have funded PACs connected to 2020 election denial and [local races in Wisconsin](#), according to the Brennan Center for Justice.

The 1776 Project PAC has spent more than \$2.6 million, with the bulk of that going to printed mailers, campaign finance filings show. Girdusky said mailers are the best way to target people in school districts because they are so much smaller than congressional districts. Commercials cost more money and influence larger geographic areas, he said.

He said the PAC also has spent money on text messaging campaigns and digital microtargeting, or using online data to reach small groups of people. He said it has paid for commercials in larger races, such as in a statewide race for superintendent in Oklahoma, and a race for an Ohio Board of Education seat that is about the size of a congressional district.

The 1776 Project PAC has candidates on ballots in Texas, Arkansas, Michigan, Indiana, Florida, Maryland and Virginia, too. The races include:

- Five candidates for a seven-member board in Round Rock, Texas
- Four candidates for a seven-member board in Wylie, Texas
- Five candidates for a seven-member board in Bentonville, Arkansas
- Four candidates for a seven-member board in New Buffalo, Michigan
- Three candidates for a five-member board in Carroll, Maryland
- Three candidates for a seven-member board in Brandywine, Michigan
- Three candidates for a seven-member board in Frederick, Maryland

New PACs have potential to outdo teachers unions

The rise of groups such as the 1776 Project PAC have the potential to outflank local teachers unions, whose endorsements and local funding have been the longtime keys to success in school board races across the country.

A [study published in January](#) by Hoover fellow Michael Hartney at Stanford University showed that "teachers' unions reliably win 70 percent of the school board races in which they make an endorsement." That's the same success rate that the 1776 Project PAC advertises now.

"The local union affiliates will make endorsements, not even the state union," Hartney said in an interview. "But the local union affiliates in many states can tap into the funds of the state union's political action committee."

In the race for one school board seat in the San Diego Unified School District, for example, the local San Diego Education Association Political Action Committee spent \$96,000 this month on things including mailers and other advertisements, according to

campaign finance filings with the county registrar of voters office. More than half of that went to oppose candidate Becca Williams, who on her website says students deserve an "agenda-free" education.

Early in her campaign, Williams' campaign team sent a mailer to local constituents reflecting sentiments against CRT, and for parent choice. Williams said in an interview she is running in part because the school board needs representatives who, like her, are not backed by the teachers union. "The unions continue to put up candidates who cave to the labor movement as opposed to providing quality education for kids," Williams said.

Her opponent Cody Petterson said that while he fully supports the union and encourages their support, he's running a pro-public education campaign and wants to enforce district policies that will help kids recover from pandemic-related achievement loss.

The scale of local involvement by national teachers unions is hard to quantify. The federal PACs affiliated with the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers largely get involved with federal races for the House and Senate. Neither group provided a list of candidates they have endorsed.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said her group does not usually get involved in local races unless its local affiliates request help. She played down her group's influence, saying they only have about one one-thousandth of the power that many of the union's critics say it does.

"In 12 years as president of AFT, I can count on two hands the ones we were seriously involved in," Weingarten said. "These are local affairs and local issues that they are bringing to the national level."

She referenced the former adviser to President Donald Trump [who declared on his "War Room" podcast in 2021](#) that the path to victory for Republicans was through school boards.

"It's Steve Bannon and part of his MAGA game plan," she added.

The group's federal PAC, the AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education, raised \$10.6 million and spent \$15.3 million through the end of August, [according to filings with the Federal Election Commission](#). The money largely has targeted federal races, and its [biggest contributions](#) have been to federal PACs the Democrats are using to win seats in the House and Senate.

The NEA's super PAC raised \$24.7 million and spent \$16.1 million through the end of September, [federal filings show](#).

Becky Pringle, president of the National Education Association, said in an email that parents and educators have turned out in record numbers to support and elect pro-public education school board candidates.

“At the same time, parents and voters in rural, suburban, and urban communities alike have rejected extreme candidates “running to politicize classrooms, ban books about Martin Luther King Jr. and Anne Frank, and use students as pawns in culture wars,” she said.

Girdusky, of the 1776 Project PAC, said his aim is to make sure kids don’t end up in situations like his godson, who Girdusky said was taught about white privilege through a children's book at school.

“This is something that I do because I think it is important and the demand is so great,” Girdusky said.

Revved up efforts at the state and local level

At the local level, PACs and other interest groups are getting involved in ways that have never been seen before.

In Texas, the state’s Republican Party announced in June 2021 it would create a committee to help capture seats in local elections, including school boards. In a statement, party chairman Matt Rinaldi listed 10 districts where the party helped elect what he called “anti-indoctrination candidates” in elections this past May.

One of the most active PACs in the state working to elect parents' rights advocates is the Southlake Families PAC, which spent nearly \$137,000 from July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2022, according to filings with the Texas Ethics Commission. At the end of June, the PAC reported having \$128,000 in cash on hand.

In central Florida, a federal super PAC that [raised \\$4.8 million](#) from the end of 2020 to the end of September, American Principles Project, got involved in its one and only school board race.

Terry Schilling, the group’s president, said he saw an opportunity when he saw a slate of three candidates running for the Polk County School Board on a parental rights platform. American Principles Project PAC spent \$25,000 on advertisements there ahead of an August primary, he said.

“You can get more bang for your buck with these races,” he said, “but also I think that they’re attractive because we can win.”

One of the races is headed to a runoff Nov. 8 and will define control over the district, [the seventh-largest in Florida](#). Schilling said he plans to spend between \$10,000 and \$25,000 to support their candidate, Jill Sessions.

Moms for Liberty Florida, a political action committee affiliated with a nationwide network of dark money groups of the same name, gave \$250 donations to 56 candidates running in 24 county districts, according to records with the Florida Department of Elections. The group spent another \$21,000 on texting services. Moms for Liberty Florida is funded almost entirely by a \$50,000 donation from Julie Fancelli, heiress to the Publix super markets fortune.

Many of the 56 candidate won elections early this year, and a remaining few are going on to runoff races Nov. 8, Moms for Liberty co-founder Tiffany Justice said.

The group's Florida-based PAC is funding candidates that "respect fundamental parental rights," Justice said. The term, she explained, is a catch-all for any candidate that does not want to "co-parent with the government."

"2022 is the year of the parent revolution," Justice said.

LOCAL

Unknowns before 2020, leaders in the reopen movement have the Bucks County GOP's attention

**John Anastasi**

Bucks County Courier Times

Published 10:01 p.m. ET Sept. 21, 2022

The highest-profile members of the COVID-era movement to challenge state and local COVID-19 restrictions are still making plenty of noise. And national conservative organizations, Republican gubernatorial candidate Doug Mastriano, and the Bucks County GOP are listening — perhaps like never before.

The pandemic made names for, and conservative media darlings out of, Bucks County residents Jamie Cohen Walker and Megan Brock as, starting in 2020, they decried the government's "unwarranted and harmful" COVID response, which was typified by school closures, mask mandates and business shutdowns.

Along with ReOpen Bucks co-founder Josh Hogan, their early influence was largely at school board meetings and on social media. People began paying attention as the criticism grew and they took on decision makers and demanded answers.

Calling out the Bucks County GOP

The Bucks County Republican Committee seemed to keep the Walker, Brock and Josh Hogan at arm's length in early 2021, even though watchdogging government interference in citizens' lives has long been a GOP hallmark.

Early 2021 was when Walker, who lives in Chalfont, appeared on one of this newspaper's podcasts to criticize the Central Bucks School District's decision to close schools to in-person learning in August 2020. Around the same time, Brock, who is from Northampton, penned a guest opinion about school closings entitled "Forgive us, children, for not fighting harder"

and West Rockhill's Hogan — ripped "CDC misguidance" related to schools on his group's blog.

"I think the party was involved (in opposing COVID-related mandates) but school boards are seen as nonpolitical," Bucks County Republican Committee Chair Pat Poprik said when asked about the party's level of activism on the topic.

Brock and Hogan, however, sent the Bucks GOP a clear "thanks for nothing" message on Aug. 31, 2021, when it announced on Facebook that the Wolf administration would require masking in schools to start the 2021-2022 school year.

"It's hard to put into words just how feckless and weak you are, Bucks County Republican Committee," Hogan said in a comment on the Bucks GOP's Facebook post. "Why don't you get the hell out of the way, so that real men and women can fight? Since you obviously never will."

In another comment on the same thread, Brock called the Bucks County GOP "completely worthless."

"If we saw even a glimmer of a heartbeat from the GOP I think we'd all feel a lot more positive. You've given us nothing. We will have to find and align ourselves with other candidates. You are losing our vote."

An evolving relationship in Bucks County politics

At a moment in which the Republican Party in Bucks County is locked in a struggle between its more-moderate members and a more-conservative segment embodied by Andy Meehan's RightForBucks splinter group, the relationship between the Bucks GOP and Brock, Hogan and Walker seems to be evolving.

In July, the committee, on its Facebook page, shared this newspaper's editorial arguing that the county should turn certain records over to Brock and Walker. The Bucks GOP said it was joining the newspaper's call for the commissioners to stop appealing court decisions that ordered the county to release requested emails.

Then, last month, the Bucks GOP called on Eric Nagy to resign from his post as Bucks County's head of policy and communications based on information Walker, Brock and Hogan provided to conservative magazine the National Review.

More: Who authored Bucks County's COVID guidelines?

The trio told the National Review it found metadata listing Nagy as the "author" of a document that shifted the county health department's guidance to schools from mask-optional to mask-required for the start of the 2021-2022 school year. Brock, Hogan, Walker and others in the reopen movement have long suspected that Bucks County Health Department Director Dr. David Damsker was cut out of the August 2021 decision to recommend masks be required for students.

Without specifically addressing the guidance document, Nagy told the National Review that he is "responsible for and routinely involved with, reviewing and disseminating information to the public." Around the same time, county spokesman James T. O'Malley issued a nearly identical statement to the Delaware Valley Journal. The DV Journal is an online news and opinion publication of insidesources.com, founded in 2014 by the former communications director for Mitt Romney's presidential campaign in Iowa.

The name in the metadata lists as "author" the person who created the digital file, but there is no way to track who actually wrote the content. In some cases, the author field may not accurately reflect who wrote the words it contains, the county said.

It may also be worth noting that the county guidance wasn't binding. School districts could ignore it if they chose to. Also the county's guidance was essentially rendered meaningless just a week later when the Wolf administration stepped in and ordered masks to be worn inside K-12 school buildings, citing rising infection numbers attributable to the Delta variant.

Either way, Poprik signaled her support for Walker, Brock and Hogan after the National Review story dropped when she called for Nagy's resignation.

"If this is true, as the evidence presented suggests, it represents a significant overreach by a political operative and a violation of the trust voters have in our county government," Poprik said in her statement. "Parents rightfully expect these kinds of decisions to be made by public health professionals, not former campaign staffers."

While it's true that Poprik has long objected to the hiring of Nagy, who managed the successful 2019 campaigns of Democratic commissioners Diane-Ellis Marseglia and Bob Harvie, the statement also followed a summer sit-down between Poprik and reopen advocates.

During that meeting, which Poprik believes Hogan requested, the parents gave the GOP a detailed look at what they were doing.

"I don't think any of us thought there was a hatchet to bury," Poprik said when asked if the meeting had a "bury-the-hatchet" feel. "We just were finding out more information and we're supportive of their efforts."

It was not long after that meeting that Poprik's August statement formalized that support.

"We agree with what they're asking for and I think we'll be able to work with them on things we agree on," said Poprik, who noted she didn't know of any particular issue where they'd have to part company. "We're in lockstep. We don't think the county should be doing what it's doing (regarding Brock's and Walker's Right-to-Know requests)."

Hogan and Brock declined to be interviewed for this story. Walker emailed a statement that steered clear of topics related to the county GOP and the trio's growing influence, beyond suggesting she and her colleagues have been on the right side of the debate.

In a follow-up interview, Walker acknowledged being present for the meeting but indicated she doesn't care much about the inner workings of the Bucks GOP. She characterized herself as a politically moderate, stay-at-home mom of three school-aged children who, until COVID, didn't know how to submit a Right-to-Know request.

Now she's a stay-at-home mom with literally thousands upon thousands of email communications between a host of school district, county and state officials that leave her convinced that politics played an outsized role in keeping children home from school.

"It's always been my thing that the kids needed to be in school," said Walker, who comes from a family of teachers. "None of this was making sense to me."

Right for conservative media

The same day that the National Review reported the metadata discovery — Aug. 17 — Brock called in to The Rich Zeoli Show on Talk Radio 1210 WPHT in Philadelphia to discuss what she framed as the Pennsylvania State Education Association's push to keep schools remote in 2021-2022.

Two days later, she joined another WPHT host — Dom Giordano — on his "Readin', Writin' and Reason" education-focused podcast to talk about the National Review story, a topic she revisited the following week on Giordano's Aug. 23 radio show. That same day, she spent more than 15 minutes on AM 990 The Answer chatting with Philadelphia's Morning Answer host Chris Stigall on a range of topics, including her opposition to the campaigns of Josh

Judicial Watch in her own Bucks County Right-to-Know cases. It wasn't her first time with any of those hosts.

Walker isn't new at this either. She has authored or been featured in pieces published by RealClearEducation, the Commonwealth Foundation and Broad + Liberty, all of which lean to the right, politically. She has talked about she and Brock's work on Fox News' Fox & Friends and on The Megyn Kelly Show, which airs on SiriusXM.

"They randomly called me," Walker said of the producers of Fox & Friends. "I still don't know where they got my phone number....There wasn't anything to prepare. I just told the story. I did this every day."

It's no surprise that Brock and Walker get on the air or in the media so frequently, said Giordano in a recent interview. Damsker had been a frequent, popular and outspoken guest who suddenly went silent and Walker and Brock were the people putting forth an explanation for why that was the case. He added that Walker's and Brock's relentless use of the Right-to-Know law to obtain emails between Bucks County's key players works as a hedge against attacks on their credibility.

"Megan Brock is particularly good," Giordano said. "She's detailed, she's buttoned-up....it's a flawless presentation and the vetting is intense."

Brock and Walker's brand — suburban moms of school-aged children at odds with the government — and story resonate, at least with conservatives, beyond Bucks County's borders.

"I think we will see more of this," said Giordano.

He added, though, that for now it only seems to be happening with this level of intensity in purple Bucks County and that, he said, could be part of their appeal.

The story certainly appeals to Republican gubernatorial candidate State Sen. Doug Mastriano, of Franklin County, who's apparently keeping Walker and Brock on his radar.

More: Mastriano says Dems 'meddled' in Bucks County COVID guidelines. County calls claim 'pathetic'

“It’s no surprise that a Democratic operative thought he knew better than the director of the Bucks County Health Department when it came to school masking policies. It’s clear that a coordinated effort to force students to wear masks unfolded thanks to a rogue county staffer

and pressure from the Pennsylvania Department of Health,” Mastriano said in an Aug. 31 statement issued from the Senate Republican Communications Office.

Is there a master plan?

Their critics have suggested this isn't about masks, school closures or who authored what guidance. At least not anymore.

After a blistering public comment period that featured Walker and Brock, as well as others, during the Sept. 7 Bucks County Board of Commissioners meeting, board chairman Robert J. Harvie Jr. made this statement:

"I appreciate the people who have come out here and are looking for something other than just political gains, looking to take over a party, looking to spread disinformation and sow division in our county," Harvie said. "We've seen a lot of that in our country. It is deeply concerning and troubling to see people being manipulated by people within our own county."

Watch: Bucks County Board of Commissioners meeting Sept. 7

Speaking about Walker and Brock, who became a Northampton Township Republican committeewoman in May, Harvie later said he was uncertain of their endgame.

"I'm not sure what their goals are, but if you look at it, (reopen movement leaders) were in districts that didn't follow the (health department) guidance anyway," he said. "You have to ask 'Is it really about guidance, or were they trying to tap into an issue that people cared about?'"

Admittedly, that's politics, he said.

"Both parties have to try to harness the energy of people on some level," Harvie said. "But you don't want to hitch your wagon to something you can't control. You have to decide 'How do you want to win elections?'. Do you want to do it in a way that is damaging to the fabric of the community?"

And that's a question that Poprik may well hear if the Bucks GOP deepens its ties with those who as recently as last summer called it "feckless", "weak" and "completely worthless."

"I'd imagine it's very difficult to be in charge of the Bucks GOP right now when there's a contingent growing that wants to push it to the right," Harvie said.

Hogan and Brock declined to be interviewed for this story, but Walker didn't mince words.

"I have no interest in politics," she said. "I just want kids to be left alone and to be able to go to school and live as normally as possible."

NEWS



This Bucks County man spent \$500,000 on the last Pa. school board races. Here's what we know about his involvement this year



The Philadelphia Inquirer



started is now branding itself as a conservative super PAC seeking to “stop the liberal left.”



Paul Martino, photographed at his Doylestown home in October 2021, plans to again be involved in this year's school board races, two years after he gave \$500,000 to a PAC that backed mostly Republican ... [Read more](#)

ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer

by Maddie Hanna
Published Mar 28, 2023

Two years ago, Paul Martino poured \$500,000 into Pennsylvania school board races in what the Bucks County venture capitalist and GOP donor billed as a bipartisan effort to ensure pandemic school closures wouldn't happen again.

This year, with school board seats again on the ballot in Pennsylvania, Martino isn't claiming any political neutrality. The Back to School political action committee he started is now branding itself as a conservative super PAC seeking to "stop the liberal left."

Martino, who founded the new [Bankroll sports bar](#) near Rittenhouse Square and has two children in the Central Bucks School District, is also speaking out in favor of policies approved by the school board's Republican majority, and his wife, Aarati Martino, a Google engineer, is running as a Republican for a seat on the board.

Martino declined an interview request but answered some questions by email. Here's what we know about Martino's current interests and involvement in school board races.

His PAC aims to counter those 'indoctrinating our children'

In July 2021, [Martino announced that he had committed \\$500,000 to a newly formed PAC](#), Back to School PA, that would make \$10,000 donations to 50 slates of candidates across the state. It was likely the most money a single donor had ever committed.

The PAC's formation came as school boards were at [the center of tense debate around topics including critical race theory](#), an issue being pushed by Republican politicians.

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» **READ MORE:** [From 2021: A Bucks County dad angered by COVID-19 closures gave \\$500,000 to school board candidates. Critics say it's fueling 'toxic' politics.](#)

Martino said at the time that he was solely focused on opposing pandemic school closures and had given money to some Democrats. But most of the PAC's money went to Republicans, and Martino — who previously described himself to the Inquirer as a “hardcore Republican” — had framed the effort as an attempt to counter teachers' unions, traditional allies of Democrats.

The PAC now has a broader — and explicitly partisan — focus.

Back to School USA “is taking the fight directly to the liberal teachers' unions and special interest groups that are responsible for indoctrinating our children,” its website reads.

Clarice Schillinger, who previously worked for Back to School PA and ran in the Republican primary for lieutenant governor, is the federal PAC's executive director.

» **READ MORE:** [From 2021: School board meetings turn tense with debates over critical race theory and masking](#)

In an email, Schillinger said the PAC “plans to invest in the races across the U.S. where the public school unions are backing candidates ...The system set within our democracy should not be owned by one side or another.” The budget, number of candidates, and locations will be “determined by the support we get from concerned citizens across the country.”

Jeff Yass donates to his PAC, and James O’Keefe will feature at its fundraiser

Records show the PAC — which registered as a federal super PAC in June 2022 — took in \$58,000 last year, including \$25,000 from [Jeff Yass, the Main Line billionaire investor](#) and school-choice proponent. (In 2021, Back to School PA received \$145,000 from PACs that have received significant funding from Yass.)

It donated \$9,900 last year to a Virginia PAC that backs candidates with “conservative principles” for school board and other offices, and \$3,000 to a school board candidate in Georgia.

Back to School USA had been planning to host an April 7 fundraiser at Mar-a-Lago with Project Veritas founder James O’Keefe, who was removed as leader

of the right-wing group that secretly films people to expose supposed liberal bias.

An invite for the event — aimed at “flipping woke school boards Nationwide!” — listed a host committee that includes former Mississippi governor Phil Bryant, U.S. Reps. Mark Alford of Missouri and Dale Strong of Alabama, and Sheriff Mark Lamb of Arizona. (Lamb has partnered with Brave Books, a children’s book company that promises that it “will never go woke. We are committed to providing your family books with Biblical and patriotic truth.”)

The event was removed from the PAC’s website over the weekend. Martino said that “all events at Mar-a-Lago were postponed recently,” but the PAC expects to hold the event in the future.

It’s a fight against ‘porn,’ not an LGBTQ bias

In Central Bucks, where rival campaigns are mobilizing as the district and Republican-led school board face allegations of anti-LGBTQ bias, Martino says he’ll be backing Republican candidates.

“We have not set any limits or targets on how much money will be spent to support our slate of candidates,” he said, referring to Bucks Families for Leadership, the Martino-founded PAC that served as the primary funding source for the district’s Republican slate in the 2021 election.

Martino recently has spoken out on social media in support of recent school board policies, including a [policy targeting sexualized content in library books](#) that was adopted over the outcry of the ACLU — which has since [filed a federal discrimination complaint against the district](#) — and others who warned of censorship and worried LGBTQ-themed books would be at risk of removal.

Since the district enacted rules accompanying the policy, district employees say [more than 60 books have been challenged](#).

“This is again not about gay rights, this is about PORN,” Martino wrote on his Facebook page. “Yes it is about PORN and you can find PORN in many school libraries because its there now.”

In his email, Martino said “the books issue is not a top priority for me and will not be in the future. That said, I felt compelled to comment as the misinformation on this topic is absurd.” He noted that if a book is removed, the district says it “shall be replaced with a book from the same genre or with a similar pedagogical purpose.” (Lawyers with the ACLU say the language is an attempt to justify removals and have questioned how alternatives would be decided.)

“I am sure there are better books to be in our library than ‘Gender Queer,’”

Martino said “This doesn’t make me a book banner”

Martino also defended Central Bucks' [ban on staff advocacy](#) — which prohibits Pride flags and other displays in classrooms — calling it a “nonsensical narrative” that the policy was anti-LGBTQ. “It's not the school's job to create safe spaces — it's the school's job to educate our kids,” he wrote online, later adding that he wasn't talking about physical safety, but safety from ideas that people might disagree with.

His wife is running for school board ‘to positively lift’ the district

Aarati Martino declined an interview request. On a newly launched campaign website, she said she was running “to positively lift our kids, our district, and our community!” and aimed to “teach kids grit, compassion, respect, responsibility” and tackle pandemic learning loss.

Martino — who is also a GOP donor and gave money last year to U.S. Senate candidate Mehmet Oz and in 2021, to candidates Kathy Barnette and Jeff Bartos — recently [told the Delaware Valley Journal](#) she and Paul moved from Silicon Valley to Doylestown “so our kids could grow up somewhere normal, with good schools and great hoagies.”

Silicon Valley has a “huge divide,” she said: “You either send your kids to a very expensive, elite private school with all the other well-compensated people's kids, or you could send them into public school where your kids are going to school with gangsters.”

On Facebook, she elaborated on the “gangsters” comment, saying she had asked a colleague “what was so bad” about the schools in Mountain View, Calif., where Google's headquarters are located.

“They said that when you invited kids from the class over for birthday parties, you would usually invite everyone (as any inclusive parent would do)” she

wrote. “However in this case you actually did have to be careful, because some of the parents were dangerous criminals!”

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Maddie Hanna [✉](#) [🐦](#)

I cover K-12 education, focusing on suburban schools, charter schools, and education funding.

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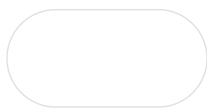
How the Far Right Took Over a Pennsylvania School Board—And How Parents Took It Back

“It hit us like a ton of bricks,” one local mother says of the antidiversity policies and curricula that swept her school district in Bucks County. In response, a federal complaint filed by community members on behalf of students could be a national “blueprint” for resistance.

BY KATHRYN JOYCE

FEBRUARY 5, 2024

<https://www.vanityfair.com/news/far-right-pennsylvania-school-board>.



Last spring, when the odds seemed far longer, **Bob Cousineau**, a social studies teacher at Pennridge High School, predicted that whatever happened in his embattled district would become a national “case study” one way or another. It would either create “the blueprint” for outside political interests to enact a complete takeover of local public schools, he said, or “the blueprint for how to stand up to it.”

For much of the past two years, Pennridge School District, in Bucks County, Pennsylvania—one of Philadelphia’s suburban swing counties—has served as an experiment in how far conservatives can pull public schools right.

Until this past November, its nine school board members had all been elected as Republicans, including a five-member majority **reportedly** affiliated with the activist group Moms for Liberty. Policies introduced by the board and district administrators in recent years have been sweeping: Two separate groups focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues were shut down; LGBTQ+ “Pride” rainbows were **banned** alongside other “advocacy” symbols; curriculum was repeatedly changed or culled to remove purportedly partisan topics; and more than a dozen library books—most related to race, gender, or sexuality—**were reportedly “shadow-banned”** by officials unwilling to wait for a formal review. **Anti-trans policies** were

passed, school staff were **ordered** not to use “terms related to LGBTQ,” and a full year of social studies was cut from graduation requirements to make room for supposedly more patriotic instruction.

All of this reached a boiling point last April, when Pennridge hired a brand-new consultancy firm called Vermilion Education. The company, according to its website, is intended to help school board members keep their districts “**ideology-free**,” but critics say it is meant to transform public school districts along the lines of the right-wing Hillsdale College. At the Moms for Liberty annual conference in July, Vermilion founder **Jordan Adams** **said** that districts like Pennridge, where conservatives had gained control of school boards, faced a “do or die kind of moment” to enact so many new changes, so swiftly, that their opponents wouldn’t be able to resist. “If we don’t make the most of this chance,” he said, “we’re not going to get another one.”

“It hit us like a ton of bricks,” said **Laura Foster**, a local mother who helped create the progressive advocacy group the **Ridge Network** to fight the right-wing dominance of Pennridge’s schools. “They systematically changed policies in the school...so if there’s racism happening, you can’t do anything about it; if there’s homophobia, you can’t do anything about it. Just these methodical, step-by-step plays.”

That’s how things seemed in Pennridge until November’s school board election, when all five open seats were won by Democrats—a stunning turnaround in a district with a more than **3:2 Republican advantage**. A week later, another page in an emerging playbook for fighting back was more quietly revealed, when a group of Pennridge community members charged that the policies Pennridge had adopted weren’t just partisan, but violated civil rights law, in a **federal complaint** that could have implications far beyond Bucks County.

When the Pennridge board passed a last-minute motion to hire Vermilion Education last April, the company was virtually unheard of apart from a controversy that had just roiled Sarasota, Florida. There, another school board had **unsuccessfully** attempted to **contract it** to review curricula, teacher trainings, union contracts, and more.

But if Adams and Vermilion were unknown quantities, for many in Pennridge, what they seemed to represent was not.

Before officially launching Vermilion in March, Adams had worked for his alma mater, Hillsdale—a private Christian college in Michigan **dedicated to** “classical” education, hard-right political advocacy, and spreading its education model nationwide. Its “**1776 Curriculum**” for grades K-12 has been **criticized** for revisionist history, **including** whitewashed accounts of US **slavery** and depictions of Jamestown as a failed **communist** colony. Hillsdale boasts a national **network** of affiliated charter schools, and one of its former professors helped **revise** South Dakota’s **social studies standards** along the lines of the 1776 Curriculum. In Florida, Governor **Ron DeSantis** **appointed** a slate of hard-right board members at the public New College of Florida, with the goal of transforming it into a “**little Hillsdale**” of the South.

A Hillsdale employee until early 2023, Adams **worked on** its charter program and to promote the college’s **1776 Curriculum**. He’d also been **enlisted** by Florida’s Department of Education to review math textbooks for “prohibited topics” like critical race theory, and by South Dakota to **train teachers** on the new social studies standards.

In Sarasota, after public outcry over Adams’s proposed contract with the district, two conservative board members broke rank and **blocked** it. The following week, after Pennridge hired Vermilion instead, Sarasota board chair **Bridget Ziegler**—a Moms for Liberty cofounder—**lamented** on Facebook that Vermilion’s inaugural “‘WOKE’ Audit” should have been with them. “We could have and should have led on this.”

In Pennridge, there were also anti-Vermilion protests. Nearly 2,000 residents signed on to a **petition** opposing the contract, while school board meetings filled with speakers expressing their outrage for hours on end. But until recently, none of it seemed to make a difference.

Laura Foster grew up in Pennridge and attended its schools, as have her three children. The area had always been fairly conservative. But in recent years, she said, the district had seemed to swing further to the right. Bucks County became an epicenter of ugly fights over **COVID masking** and **rainbow flags**. As of early 2022, it had the highest number of January 6 arrestees of any locality, according to **local media**. In 2021, a Bucks County venture capitalist and longtime Republican funder concerned about COVID closures **donated** half a million dollars to school board races around the state.

Also in 2021 came Pennridge’s first serious battles over diversity programs. That June, a local parent-teacher DEI group—formed to address student reports of racism and homophobia—

installed a bulletin board display in Seylar Elementary School featuring collages representing Juneteenth, the Puerto Rican Day Parade, the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival, and Pride.

When Seylar guidance counselor **Missy Kunakorn** walked out of her office that day and saw two moms stapling up the display, “I broke down and cried, because I thought, There we are. I can’t believe we’re at this turning point,” she said. “Then,” she adds, “it all came like a landslide.”

That month, then school board vice president **Joan Cullen**—who earlier had **claimed** on social media that systemic racism doesn’t exist—**charged** that the various DEI initiatives underway in the district were influenced by critical race theory, the academic concept just emerging as a target of conservative ire. (Cullen did not respond to a request for comment.) The bulletin board was removed, and by August, Kunakorn said, DEI had become “a bad word.” Meanwhile, local resident **David Bedillion** helped organize a parent group to protest DEI initiatives, and parents came as a bloc to school board meetings. Some charged that the existence of DEI programs cast the entire district as racist, or that highlighting student differences is racist in and of itself, and called to suspend district DEI programs.

At the start of the school year, the board **voted** to do just that. The district’s **website** was scrubbed of references to DEI, and a new, board-directed committee was created to review DEI initiatives. But it didn’t get far. The group spent months debating its mission, including hours of disagreement over the meaning of the word *equity*, and one of its open community meetings was derailed when a member of the public called a Black committee member “boy.”

That year, books by two Black women authors were **removed** from the ninth-grade English curriculum, and one unit of English instruction, “Dreams and Oppressions,” was changed to remove the word *oppressions* from its title, reframing the course to focus on personal obstacles rather than systemic discrimination. On Facebook, Bedillion’s group shared an email they had received from the superintendent, who, according to a **screenshot** shared on social media, wrote that the district was implementing the changes after reviewing the group’s “feedback.”

By November, when a slate of Republican school board **candidates** who’d **campaigned** against DEI was **elected**, the changes started to come hard and fast. The new DEI committee was **disbanded** in early 2022, as students **continued** to report racial hostility. According to the civil rights complaint, some Black students had grown so accustomed to hearing the N-word that they said they stopped responding unless the language was directed at them personally.

Meanwhile, according to documents published by **WHYY** shortly after the election, school administrators were imposing new restrictions. One policy directed librarians and principals to remove all library books “referencing gender identity” from elementary student circulation; another directed staff to not “discuss or use terms related to LGBTQ” with elementary school students, to obtain parental permission before following students’ requests to be called by a different name or pronouns, and to inform parents of students who become pregnant.

Then there was the curriculum. At the new board’s first **meeting** in January 2022, members of its new majority attacked proposed AP World History textbooks for not focusing enough on the “meat and potatoes of history,” and complained that elementary social studies didn’t adequately “focus on the greatness of America.” Another new board member suggested, in a March 2022 **email** obtained by the Bucks County Beacon, that a high school journalism course should incorporate podcasts from right-wing celebrities like **Dennis Prager, Ben Shapiro, Candace Owens**, and Senator **Ted Cruz** to replace existing material concerning climate change, LGBTQ+ issues, or racial justice.

As a means of making the world history course optional, the board majority **proposed** cutting social studies graduation requirements by a year, to make room for a new ninth-grade “American Studies” course focused on instilling patriotism and an understanding of the Constitution. What it would mean in practice, said teacher Bob Cousineau, was a 114-year gap in history instruction for the district’s students, since Pennridge eighth-grade history went up to the year 1800, and 10th-grade started at World War I.

Parents, teachers, and students united in **public backlash**. But in December 2022, the board majority **voted** it through anyway, and school staff began writing the new replacement course and working on “**overlaying**” the Hillsdale College curriculum with the current social studies curriculum.

But in the following months, board member **Jordan Blomgren** started growing suspicious that Pennridge teachers didn’t intend to actually make use of Hillsdale’s materials. As she would later argue in school board meetings, Hillsdale’s 1776 Curriculum was “supposed to be overlaid” with the district’s lesson plans, yet “there was never any evidence of that overlay” actually happening. She contacted the college to ask for advice, and met Jordan Adams, then in the process of parlaying his Hillsdale credentials into a new consultancy business—Vermilion Education—targeted at conservative school boards hoping to

transform their school districts. (Blomgren did not respond to a request for comment.)

On April 25, the day before the Pennridge School Board was set to meet, Blomgren made a late addition to the meeting agenda. Tucked among 22 file attachments in a report from the finance committee was a **draft contract** to hire Vermilion Education to review and develop Pennridge curriculum. Half of the board had no idea the proposal was coming, as board member **Ron Wurz** reported in a local **op-ed**. He charged that the scope of the Vermilion contract would allow “an unqualified firm with limited experience the ability to rewrite all of our curriculum.”

District administrators were taken aback too. In an April 25 email **obtained** weeks later by **Jenny Stephens** of the Bucks County Beacon, then superintendent **David Bolton** warned the board that the last-minute proposal would be perceived as the board forcing Hillsdale materials on the district and disrupting the work underway to complete the new ninth-grade course.

But the following day, the board’s majority **approved** the contract anyway, with no apparent limit on Adams’s billable hours (at \$125 per hour) or expenses. In the following weeks, Cousineau recounted, the teachers drafting the American Studies course were told to halt their work, high school English teachers were told to stop writing a new humanities course, and a middle school reading curriculum set to receive final approval was pulled. The district’s four curriculum advisers were also **reportedly** informed that their jobs were being eliminated, though the board voted to table a motion to do so in June after public backlash. And in early June, Superintendent Bolton announced he was going on health leave; later that month, he **announced** his retirement.

“What they’re doing is removing everything in their way,” Cousineau said in June. Elected board members weren’t supposed to have a larger role in designing curriculum than teachers, he continued, but here they’d taken over the process. “They’re going in through a backdoor that’s supposed to be locked,” he said. “And when they get in, they’re going to rearrange everything the way they want.”

Weeks after the contract was approved, at a May 10 school board **meeting**, the board majority repeatedly tried to limit public discussion of Vermilion, threatening speakers with removal and going into an abrupt recess when Vermilion was brought up anyway. In early June, hundreds of Pennridge community members waited 45 minutes for an online meeting set to feature an

update about Vermilion, before board members abruptly terminated the Zoom. Board politics were so scrambled by the controversy that even former president Joan Cullen—so staunchly right-wing that she'd **attended Donald Trump's** DC rally on January 6—became one of Vermilion's fiercest **critics**, and board member Ron Wurz changed his political affiliation to Democratic.

The public sentiment at meetings was so uniformly negative that, several days prior to a June 20 session on curriculum, where Adams would finally be present, board member **Ricki Chaikin** posted an **appeal** on Facebook for local conservatives to attend and defend the Vermilion contract. "This should be something that unites the entire community," Chaikin wrote, "as this is what everyone has claimed they want." Instead, the **meeting** that night lasted more than six hours, as members of the public spoke against the contract until about 1 a.m. (Chaikin did not respond to a request for comment.)

After Adams Zoomed into the meeting—recommending books to remove from the curriculum, dramatic changes in history instruction, and a suggestion that a sixth-grade course be adapted to reflect an emphasis on "Lasting Ideas in World History," using rhetoric that, in Hillsdale charter school curricula, has been **used** to describe teaching about the Bible and "the nature of God and humanity"—the public response was withering. One elementary school principal declared it was as if Adams had "asked Alexa to 'Show him curriculum.'" Others **pointed out** that Adams, whose only classroom experience amounted to brief stints at a Hillsdale-affiliated charter and a private Catholic school, was unqualified to develop curriculum under Pennsylvania code. When Cullen noted that Adams had already been paid for 60 hours of work, the audience gasped.

Adams, who steadfastly rejects that Vermilion has any formal or informal connection to Hillsdale, denied critics' charges that Vermilion's work had its own political bias. "I have no interest whatsoever in turning students into Republican Party voters; that would be entirely beyond the purpose of a public school education, not to mention inappropriate," he said via email. Adams said he'd encountered the "lasting ideas" language that was used by Hillsdale to describe theological concepts through a different curriculum, unaffiliated with Hillsdale. "As for the claim that Vermilion intends 'to minimize teaching about the history of US race relations and LGBTQ issues,' that is a slanderous and insulting accusation of bigotry that has been baselessly leveled against me." In response to criticism that he was unqualified to write curriculum under state law, he added, "Like Pennsylvania educators and curriculum providers,

Vermilion Education was limited to making curriculum recommendations to district administrators and board members, who then had the legal authority to decide what to use, what to edit, and what to omit in making the district's curriculum."

At the June meeting, another concern was voiced: that Pennridge teachers were quitting in droves. Some noted that nearly a third of Pennridge High School's science teachers had recently resigned. By early July, the local teachers union **reported** that at least 35 of its members had left. The same month, an elementary school principal announced her resignation in an **email**, noting that while she'd once hoped to finish her career in Pennridge, "Upon reflection, I found that I needed to move in a direction that most aligned [with] my values." (Pennridge leaders declined to respond to questions for this article.)

"Right now, we're on our third principal of the year, our second temporary principal," elaborated local parent **Dan Shapiro** in an interview this fall. "We lost eight of 18 classroom teachers in one summer." And among those "who have publicly said why they left," he added, "many have cited the actions of the board."

Despite the overwhelming public opposition, the day after the June meeting, when Wurz moved to terminate the contract, calling Adams's work an "embarrassment," the motion **failed** along predictable 5-4 lines, as similar motions would throughout the coming months.

By late August, a week before school began, the scope of the changes being recommended by Vermilion started to become clear. A middle school reading program would be altered because the books, one board majority member said, were too "doom and gloom." A unit covering discrimination in a 12th-grade course called "Social Issues in Today's World" was among a list of lesson plans that Adams **flagged** as "potentially prejudiced, biased, inappropriate, or partisan." **Language throughout the proposed** curricula specified that Hillsdale materials would now be "required" instructional resources for teachers.

Worse yet, teachers who spoke at the **August 21 curriculum meeting** said they were given almost no chance to review the changes before the school board met to discuss and vote on them. In the limited time they did have, Cousineau and several colleagues identified dozens of problems with the new curriculum, from historically misleading statements to the continued issue of the century-plus gap in history education. Other teachers stood up to say they were in "panic" to start a new school year with a curriculum they hadn't even had a chance to read.

Out of all those who spoke during the public comment portion of the meeting, only one supported Vermilion: a right-wing candidate for the upcoming school board elections who **reportedly** called for hanging board members of a neighboring school district after they voted to close schools during COVID and who said in the meeting that he was most concerned that the controversy around Vermilion was harming Adams's business.

More common was the sentiment of **Kevin E. Leven**, of the Bucks County Anti-Racism Coalition, who, at the school board meeting the following week, cited the curriculum's distortion of civil rights history in declaring, "The only thing Vermilion is preparing the students of this community for is the arduous, painful, and necessary unlearning of the teachings espoused by Hillsdale later in their careers."

But despite the overwhelming opposition, by the end of that August 28 meeting, on the evening of the first day of school, the board **approved** Adams's changes on a 5-4 vote.

Local community members responded with frustration and despair. Speaking at the meeting, **Kevin Foster**, a parent and Democratic political strategist, charged that the board had "sold off" the district to advance a national conservative agenda. "To what end is Pennridge going to be used in marketing materials to advertise Hillsdale to the rest of the country?" he asked.

Meanwhile, Laura Foster (no relation) said she began to hear rumors that Adams was looking at other courses throughout the Pennridge curriculum, far beyond what he'd originally been hired to review, suggesting still more changes to come. (In response to questions, Adams said, "I only reviewed courses as requested by board members.")

"I honestly believe our district is probably the worst in the country right now that's been impacted by Hillsdale," said Laura Foster. "No one even knows what to do about this mess, because they're just wholly taking control of a public education system."

Pennridge father Dan Shapiro said he was preparing to tell his kids, "You guys might have to go to community college for a couple years to change your record, to give yourself a fresh start, so that colleges understand you've been educated in a way other than this insanity."

But they didn't stop at despair. In June, Laura Foster and a handful of other parents had founded the Ridge Network as a means of fighting the board majority. In July, they hosted a "book unbanning" party after Ridge Network cofounder **Jane Cramer** **bought** cartons of books the district was throwing away. They led a letter-writing campaign requesting

Pennsylvania government officials investigate “school board overreach in Pennridge.” They wrote and distributed an **opt-out form** for parents to demand their children not be exposed to any curriculum or resources from Vermilion, Hillsdale, PragerU, the Bill of Rights Institute, or other right-wing groups making inroads in public school curriculum. And in perhaps the biggest counteroffensive, some local families began working with Pennsylvania legal groups to prepare a federal complaint against the district, alleging it had created a hostile environment that discriminated against students of color and LGBTQ+ students and staff.

Meanwhile, in the months leading up to the election, Ridge Network members rented billboards calling for school board leadership change, as other community members conducted a relentless door-knocking **campaign**, all making a bipartisan appeal that the board’s dysfunction was hurting kids regardless of their parents’ political beliefs.

On November 7, a verdict came. All five candidates who had run on a **platform** of firing Vermilion and restoring “local control” to the district won, giving Pennridge a Democratic-majority school board “for the first time in **recent memory**.” (One of the winning candidates was Foster’s sister, **Leah Foster Rash**.) It was a striking upset, but also part of a broader pattern: Numerous right-wing school board candidates around the country—amounting to around 70% of candidates endorsed by Moms for Liberty or the 1776 Project, according to **one estimate**—were defeated in what education writer **Jennifer Berkshire** has **called** the “backlash to the backlash.”

And at the end of the month came news that one of the outgoing board’s final acts would be terminating Vermilion’s contract—either, critics **charged**, to create the impression that Adams had accomplished his task, or merely to deprive the new board of the chance to fire him. In an emailed statement, Adams said, “Both parties confirmed that all outstanding work requests from the board had been completed and agreed to conclude the contract.” But on December 4, when Pennridge’s new board was sworn in, its newly-elected president, Ron Wurz, **declared** that the incoming board would focus on undoing Vermilion’s influence and reconsidering many of the other policies the old board had passed.

In the days after the election, said Cousineau, it felt like teachers had come “back from the dead.” Not only due to the prospect of a return to normalcy after years of stressful school politics, he said, but also because they felt the broader Pennridge community had stood up for

them. “The teachers spoke passionately at board meetings: ‘This is wrong,’ ‘We’re not happy,’ ‘Please don’t do this.’ And the board still did it,” Cousineau said. “But the community held them accountable.”

“I’ve been saying we’re going to create the model of how to dismantle public education successfully, or we’re going to create a model where you can resist people who are trying to dismantle public education for political reasons,” he added. “And the latter happened.” Already, he said, people from other states were reaching out to Pennridge’s community groups like the Ridge Network and the teachers union to ask for advice on similar fights in their own communities. And Cousineau said he was planning on working with union leaders in neighboring Central Bucks School District to educate local, state, and national teachers’ unions on how to resist extremist school boards.

But the opportunities to fight back aren’t limited to school board elections, said Foster. A week after the election, on November 15, the Advocacy for Racial and Civil (ARC) Justice Clinic at the University of Pennsylvania law school and the Education Law Center of Pennsylvania **filed** their complaint on behalf of Pennridge students and educators with the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR) and the Department of Justice. (The Pennridge School District declined to comment on the complaint.)

It wasn’t the first time an OCR complaint was filed against Bucks County schools. Last year, Central Bucks was the subject of an OCR **complaint** for allegedly creating a hostile learning environment for LGBTQ+ students. But a new “**dear colleague letter,**” **released** in August by the Biden administration’s OCR, potentially opens the door wider for addressing Pennridge community complaints, by noting how school programming around race, including schools’ “race-related curricula,” can create a hostile environment that violates students’ civil rights.

The letter hypothesizes, for example, that a history teacher who teaches students that the Holocaust didn’t happen and that Nazis only wanted “to preserve a unified and culturally cohesive German society” relies on such a hostile distortion of historical fact that Jewish students might be deterred from attending class. On such grounds, the letter says, OCR could open an investigation.

It’s a short logical step from that example to attempts today, in Pennridge and around the country, to distort or minimize the reality of US slavery, or the genocide of Native Americans, or the various forms of oppression that continued for centuries after both.

In the Pennridge OCR complaint, the lawyers alleged that the district had created “a hostile environment rife with race- and sex-based harassment” in a number of ways, including by fostering a climate that tolerated racial slurs and anti-LGBTQ+ harassment; subjecting Black students to disproportionate discipline (including adult criminal citations for Black students who got in fights after being called racial slurs); and by instituting an anti-trans bathroom policy that forced a trans teacher to use a bathroom on the other side of the school building. Lawyers alleged the climate and policies had driven at least one Black family to consider moving, an LGBTQ+ student to opt for online-only instruction, and the trans teacher to resign.

But the complaint also pinpoints what Pennridge schools teach—and what they prevent students from learning—as a violation of civil rights. The curriculum changes, removal of DEI resources, and other steps to restrict student education on discrimination and its history “created an environment where race- and sex-based harassment can flourish,” the filing says.

“Students learn from the ability to understand the history of oppression. It’s one of the ways we ensure that history doesn’t repeat itself,” said **Cara McClellan**, director of the Penn Law School’s ARC Justice Clinic, and lead attorney on the OCR complaint. “Having access to a curriculum that honestly talks about history is one way we buffer against a hostile environment” or marginalized students “internalizing discrimination.” At Pennridge, McClellan continued, the school board undermined some of the very tools—like diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and access to diverse learning materials—that school districts must use in their legal duty to address a hostile environment.

While the complaint seeks specific changes in Pennridge, like the creation of a district-wide DEI position, it could also compel the federal government to weigh in on whether the far-right’s school board strategy—stifling student and staff expression, culling diverse books, banning DEI programing, and instituting revisionist history—is something that inherently violates civil rights law.

“I don’t believe there’s any precedent for that with OCR,” said Foster. “It’s always been, ‘What happened to your kid? What did the school do?’ Not that the whole school is what happened to your kid.”

If the complaint is successful, it could establish a countermodel in other school districts and states where accurate teaching of history or the inclusion of diverse voices has been replaced by the 1776 Curriculum or videos from **PragerU**.

It could take a few months at least before the federal government determines whether to open an investigation—and receiving a determination will take far longer. But ultimately, both Foster and McClellan hope the outcome is one that makes Pennridge a very different sort of model.

“This is a playbook for what you have to do,” Foster said, to unwind the damage the culture wars of the past few years have wrought on education. “There’s a lot of work to undo. But this is bigger than winning a school board.”

*This story about **Vermilion Education** was produced in partnership with **The Hechinger Report**, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for the **Hechinger newsletter**.*

LOCAL

Pennridge complaint outlines alleged 'hostile' actions against LGBTQ and students of color

**Chris Ullery**

Bucks County Courier Times

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Several families and two advocacy groups are accusing the Pennridge School District of creating a “hostile environment rife with race- and sex-based harassment,” according to a recently filed federal complaint.

The 77-page complaint from the Education Law Center and the University of Pennsylvania's Advocacy for Racial and Civil Justice Clinic details complaints from three students of color, one queer student, a transgender teacher, the Bucks County NAACP and local advocacy group, the PairUP society.

Like a similar complaint filed against the Central Bucks School District by the ACLU last October, the ELC complaint was filed Nov. 15 with the Office of Civil Rights for the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Justice.

“The federal government has been clear about severe and pervasive harassment leading to hostile environments, that there’s an affirmative duty to intervene once you’re on notice,” Ashli Giles-Perkins, staff attorney for the Education Law Center, said the day after the filing.

Title VI and Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibit discrimination based on race and gender or sexuality, requiring schools to take action when they are notified of a hostile environment against some groups when it interferes with their public education.

Pennridge counselor in legal trouble: Pennridge middle school counselor accused of inappropriate contact with student

While many of the accusations focus on incidents or policies passed within the past two years, some claims date as far back as the 2018-2019 school year and as recently as two

months ago.

The accusations include claims of repeated calls for action from school officials.

Giles-Perkins added that the complaint outlines claims from families across elementary, middle and high schools where harassment and even violence were reported to administrators and “then there's no response, there's no action or the student who brings it up is actually punished, or punished more harshly than the student who initiated it.”

Pennridge spokesman David Thomas said in a statement Thursday night that the district was in the process of reviewing the complaint.

"The district intends to review the complaint thoroughly and seek meaningful engagement with both the Department of Education and the Department of Justice. As it is a matter of litigation involving students, the district is constrained from providing any additional comment," Thomas said.

Assuming the complaint is investigated, only one of the two departments will take the lead. The education department took lead in the Central Bucks complaint a little over two weeks after it was first filed.

What does the Pennridge complaint say?

The parties in the complaint are split between two categories: the organizational complainants of the NAACP and PairUP; and the individual complainants, the first-hand accusations of bullying and discrimination repeatedly reported with little to no action, according to the complaint.

A Black elementary school student enrolled since the 2018-2019 school year was allegedly targeted by classmates, who called her “a slave,” likened her to a monkey and compared her skin to dirt, according to the complaint.

“The only year that she did not experience racial harassment was the 2020–2021 school year when she attended school online due to the COVID-19 pandemic,” the complaint adds.

Curriculum also an issue in complaint: What is the 1776 Hillsdale curriculum adopted by Pennridge?

Two high school students, one Black and one Black and Latinx, also faced repeated racial slurs over multiple school years. The slurs were so common that one of the students said they

"adapted to largely ignoring other students who use the slur, reacting only when the slur is specifically directed at them."

About two months ago, the two students got into an argument with a white student who referred to them by a slur online and then in person multiple times that morning.

A fight between the three broke out, resulting in five days suspension, a 45-day ban on extracurricular activities and a criminal assault charge for both.

The white student that the complainants say instigated the fight was given three days suspension, the filing alleges.

One recent graduate, described as "queer/pansexual" in the filing, recalled constant bullying and verbal and physical abuse that was allegedly shrugged off or ignored by employees.

Those examples vary from dumping trash on gay and transgender students in the bathrooms to students promoting violence against LGBTQ individuals.

The school board's approval last year of a policy prohibiting teachers from "displaying LGBTQ+ safe space items" and a pronoun policy, requiring parents be notified if a child wanted to use pronouns other than those matching their gender assigned at birth, only exacerbated anxieties in the student and others like her, according to the complaint.

A transgender teacher also cited the advocacy policy and a new bathroom policy among the district's actions that resulted in severe emotional distress and psychological anguish, leading to his resignation."

The complaint says the vague language of both policies left the teacher uncertain as to what could violate the advocacy policy and forced him to choose between outing himself as trans anytime he had to use a bathroom.

School policies lack Trans inclusion: Only a handful of Pa. school districts have policies protecting trans students

The bathroom policy, approved at a May school board meeting, requires students and staff to use facilities aligning with their gender assigned at birth. While the policy does allow anyone to use gender-neutral, single-user bathrooms, the complaint says those rooms are few and far between.

The NAACP has repeatedly condemned several policies and initiatives by the current school board, including an “advocacy policy” passed last year that banned Pride flags from classrooms and the dissolution of the district’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee about two years ago.

“All students deserve safety and dignity at school,” said Bucks County NAACP President Karen Downer in a news release Wednesday. “Unfortunately, Pennridge has created an environment that is hostile for some students because of their race, sex, or gender identity.”

PairUP is a local diversity advocacy group in Perkasié that includes parents of students who have allegedly reported claims of harassment to the district and made suggestions to improve the district, the complaint says.

Adrienne King, PairUP founder, said the complaint was a “last resort” for the group.

“I think we’ve tried a lot of things. We’ve given of our time, we’ve given of our resources, we’ve given of our experience and our knowledge to try to help move the district forward ... and at every turn the door was closed or it was met with an ear that wasn’t willing to fully understand or listen to really make effectual change,” King said.

King and Giles-Perkins said the ultimate goal of the complaint is to rescind certain policies and take steps to enact effective diversity education in Pennridge.

With a new school board set to replace the current one in December, King said she’s hopeful that those changes won’t have to wait until the end of a federal investigation but added that Wednesday’s filing isn’t just about who is in charge now.

“I’m hoping that (the complaint) is a playbook, but it’s also a way that we can hold whoever is sitting in those seats accountable for getting this work done and for prioritizing it,” King said.

LATEST HEADLINES

Pennridge community supports teachers, slams school board in heated exchange

The board and the community repeatedly clashed over public comment rules, culminating in a 45 minute recess.



Pennridge parents and community members attend a May school board meeting. (John Worthington – MediaNews Group)



By **JOHN WORTHINGTON** | jworthington@montgomerynews.com

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EAST ROCKHILL — Pennridge teachers received an outpouring of support from the community Wednesday evening at a volatile school board meeting in which community members slammed the board for disrespecting and underpaying teachers.

The show of support was punctuated with repeated clashes between the school board and the community over public comment rules, with the board attempting to restrict the first public comment period to agenda items up for a vote and community members accusing the board of trying to silence dissent. The clashes culminated in a 45-minute recess in which the Perkasie police were called to the school.



The heated meeting comes as the school board has advanced several controversial policies targeting teachers, including [a ban](#) on teacher advocacy and a proposed [“opt-in” policy](#) for school surveys on “controversial issues.” The board additionally [approved](#) a curriculum consulting contract with Vermilion Education LLC, a five-month-old Michigan firm with no public school experience, which was widely condemned and called an insult to the expertise and experience of teachers.

The school board and the Pennridge Education Association (PEA), the Pennridge teachers’ union, are also in the middle of contract negotiations, with the school board recently proposing a 2% salary increase. Teachers argue the proposal amounts to a pay cut when factoring in changes to health insurance contributions and inflation and will keep Pennridge teachers as the lowest paid in Bucks County.

In light of these events, a large crowd came out in force to Wednesday’s school board meeting to show support for the district’s teachers and implore the school board to start valuing and properly compensating them. Many attendees were PEA members.

As the first public comment period began, one speaker after another took the podium to praise Pennridge teachers for their hard work and dedication.

“Sue Hanson is a reading specialist at Guth Elementary. This woman is a literal magician,” said a mother. “Our Morgan could not and would not read. This woman honed in on this child and created not only a reader but a resilient student who doesn’t give up when she is behind or when she is confused.”

“I would like to highlight Mrs. Ruggiero,” said another mother. “She makes sure that every child has what they need to succeed in her class. On many occasions, she has paid for items for the class out of her own pocket. She not only supports her students but makes an effort to attend their extracurricular activities for support.”

“Mr. Cousineau is my history teacher this year and has had me grow so much academically,” said a high school student. “If anyone needed help with something, his door was always open. He was the only history teacher who told me I was too hard on myself after one not so great essay and that meant something to me.”

“If I were to describe Mrs. Stellino in one word, it would be marvelous,” said a middle school student. “She uses her free time to run rehearsals for us to be prepared for auditions and our performance in March. She also challenges us with special projects to help us grow in skill and confidence. She listens to our ideas and encourages us to try new things.”

On another note, Matt Carbonaro of Perkasio applauded board members for keeping their promise of fiscal responsibility by proposing a budget with no tax increases. He additionally expressed mixed feelings about the Vermilion contract, proclaiming support for the firm but disagreeing with the contract’s cost and rushed approval process.

“Going back to fiscal responsibility and keeping your promises, you should be more up front with what you’re doing and have contracts that are more defined for the taxpayers and the community at hand,” said Carbonaro.

Laura Foster of East Rockhill began her comment by blasting the school board for approving the Vermilion contract over unified public opposition with little notice. She demanded that the contract be terminated.

“This is a blatant attempt to push personal agendas without proper scrutiny,” said Foster.

Board solicitor Kevin Skjoldal quickly interjected, ruling Foster out-of-order for discussing a non-agenda item during the first public comment period. He said that such items can only be discussed during the second public comment period at the end of the meeting.

Foster, however, noted that a previous speaker mentioned Vermilion without interruption and proceeded with her comment, prompting an outburst from board member Megan Banis-Clemens.

“You are out of order!” shouted Banis-Clemens. “And if you don’t stop, the security is gonna come in.”

Banis-Clemens then abruptly called a recess and stormed out, followed by Skjoldal and board members David Reiss, Jordan Blomgren, Ricki Chaikin and Bob Cormack. The board members who voted against the Vermilion contract remained on the stage. Perkasio police were called to the school during the recess.

After approximately 45 minutes, the board reconvened. Skjoldal reiterated that the first public comment period is restricted to agenda items and instructed comments on non-agenda items to be held until the end of the meeting.

As the public comment period resumed, Emily Smith of East Rockhill accused board members of backroom scheming, devising secret deals and trading favors for votes. She accused the board of micromanaging every aspect of students’ school experiences, citing the board’s decision to label the NOVA Safe Touch Presentation as a “controversial topic” in need of board approval.

Skjoldal interrupted to reiterate the public comment rules. As he spoke, Smith repeatedly acknowledged her understanding of the rules.

“Next time you speak over me, I’m going to ask you to be removed,” said Skjoldal.

“Do you have that right?” asked Smith.

In defiance, Smith finished her public comment. She said the board's misplaced priorities have tanked the district's ranking, flying in the face of members' concerns about fiscal responsibility.

"The value of my home is tied to the reputation of this district, and I have to sit here and watch you fight about personal political agendas instead of talking about our test scores and rankings," said Smith. "You're destroying our reputation and the value of my home will fall with it."

Stephanie Regina criticized the board for restricting the public comment period, pointing out that high school students and teachers have a 7:15 a.m. start time and cannot stay until the end of the meeting. She said the board should have used its discretion to move the second public period up in the agenda to accommodate the speakers.

"We are having a crisis. That's why we're here. We're not here because we find this fascinating," said Regina. "I did want to shout out to our teachers because it's just deplorable what we're putting them through."

While a handful of individuals left, the majority of the crowd stayed for the second public comment period at the end of the meeting.

Katie Rene of Perkasio commended the teachers for their hard work, selflessness and resilience in the face of the board's misplaced priorities and political agenda. She described teachers as the one resource without which the school cannot function and criticized the board for mistreating them.

Dakota Murtha of Hilltown, a high school student, lauded her Pennridge teachers, specifically her history teacher, Bob Cousineau. She said Cousineau made her proud to be American, in contrast to the board's assumptions. She urged the board to show genuine appreciation for the teachers.

"Maybe let's do a little bit more for teacher appreciation week than just giving them coupons to local stores," said Murtha. "Maybe help them out with those contracts."

Tim Deose, a high school social studies teacher, mentioned that he has repeatedly served as Teacher Association president and participated in numerous contract negotiations over the years.

"In all my years teaching at Pennridge, I have never seen this level of frustration from my fellow Pennridge Education Association members," said Deose. "The Pennridge professional staff are the lowest paid educators in the entire county of Bucks, and it's time for a change."

Jim Valletta, another high school social studies teacher and chief negotiator for the PEA, urged the board to roll up its sleeves and negotiate a contract by the end of June that can attract and retain high quality teachers. He said the union plans to meet with the board on May 22.

"In Pennsylvania, the 66% drop in the certification of educators in the last decade suggests a looming crisis," said Valletta. "These are the very people who are most needed to staff Pennridge schools now and in the future. Let's get to work."

Following public comment, Banis-Clemens accused the PEA of publicizing false information to rile up the community ahead of the primary election. She stressed that the contract is a first proposal but claimed it is higher than any previous initial proposal, eliciting loud groans from teachers, many of whom began walking out. She characterized the teacher's proposal of 5% annual raises as unreasonable.

"I'm done," said an exasperated teacher as she walked out of the auditorium.

The next Pennridge school board meeting is on June 12 at 7 p.m. For more information, visit pennridge.org.

Trenton Road Takeout owner retires after 50 Years at Falls Township landmark

Trenton Road Takeout owner retires after 50 Years at Falls Township landmark

EDUCATION

Pennridge school board could limit student expression, employee 'advocacy,' books

**James McGinnis**

Bucks County Courier Times

Published 9:56 p.m. ET Aug. 3, 2022

The Pennridge School Board is revising district policies on academic freedom, student expression, and the selection of library books.

Such measures are necessary to protect students from educators who advance social and political causes, said some board members during a four-hour meeting Monday. Other policies are needed to protect students from "age-inappropriate content," said Joan Cullen, school board president.

Yet if adopted, the proposed language of the policies would "doubtless" violate of the freedoms of speech for both students and employees at Pennridge, said Witold Walczak, legal director of the Pennsylvania ACLU.

The Pennsylvania State Education Association teachers union declined comment on the proposals. Recently, the Central Bucks School District passed a similar measure related to library materials, which some critics labelled a book ban.

Walczak said the policies posted on Pennridge's website could be ruled "void for vagueness" because they do not define inappropriate conduct or content. "The uncertainty is going to translate into self-censorship and citizens will steer clear of anything that might upset the people in power," he said.

"This is what we see in totalitarian countries," Walczak added.

More than a dozen people spoke during approximately 40 minutes of public comment at the Monday meeting, and none spoke in favor of the proposed policies.

Such measures are “unconstitutional and un-American,” said Jane Kramer, the mother of a high school student.

Board member Ron Wurz said residents didn’t understand the intent. “It’s not about the board restricting speech in the classroom,” Wurz said. “It’s about making sure that divisive issues such as religion, gender, sexuality, abortion and politics, are represented from a neutral perspective.”

At one point, Cullen compared books to e-cigarettes. Book publishers are secretly pushing agendas, she said.

"Publishers are deliberately creating content that they know full well is inappropriate for children and putting it in a [shipment] of a thousand books."

No specific book or other content was referenced during the meeting.

During the hearing, Cullen also questioned whether it was appropriate for a Pennridge teacher to wear a symbol in support of the LGBTQ community. Such symbols could make Christian students uncomfortable, she said.

“If you have a rainbow, do you also have a Christian cross to make sure that you are welcoming to students of that faith?” asked Cullen.

A Christian student might worry that a teacher, who supports gay rights, is going to treat that student more harshly, Cullen said. “Is she [the teacher] going to hold that against me if she is going to advocate for something that is anti-Christian?”

The ACLU said it would immediately bring a lawsuit, if Pennridge tries to stop a student or teacher from wearing an LGBTQ symbol in schools. "If you're going to tell kid a kid she can't wear a pride flag, then I'll see you in federal court," Walczak said. "This case is dead on arrival."

No policy was approved Monday. Changes could be approved at a future meeting of the school board.

Books in Central Bucks: Central Bucks approves library policy some view as book ban

For subscribers: Is Woke PA behind the controversial Central Bucks library policy? A look at origin of 'book ban'

More on Pennridge: Amid controversy, Pennridge group wants to change school board elections. Could it impact who serves?

Pennridge policy would 'control' handouts from students

Revisions to a policy entitled "Student Expression/Dissemination of Materials" contain language that seemingly would prohibit any student from distributing anything non-school related while in school or on a school bus, both during school hours and during school-sponsored events.

Yet, Superintendent David Bolton stated that it would not be enforced. He said the district would not ban students from distributing all materials.

School board member Megan Banis-Clemens questioned whether the proposed language would prohibit a student from sharing a birthday card or invitations to a party with classmates.

Bolton said the district would not prevent someone sharing a birthday card. However, no language was specifically added to the policy to make exceptions.

Cullen said the student expression policy “came out of a desire to control what we have in our schools.”

During the meeting, she referenced a hypothetical student who wanted to pass out notices of a church event or the need for volunteer firefighters. Board members also debated whether students should be allowed to distribute pamphlets in the school hallways or the parking lot.

“We have to be able to control those outside organizations that want to advertise in our schools because otherwise it would cause disruption to the school day,” said Cullen. “We’re going to take another look at the policy to make sure we get the language right.”

Pennridge targets teacher advocacy

School employees and other civil servants are generally barred from engaging in political activity while on the job.

Pennridge's policy could go further, expanding from banned political activities to “areas of advocacy, including but not limited to religion, gender identity, social, political and geo-political matters,” under the language of a proposed policy discussed Monday.

The policy includes no further definition of prohibited advocacy activities, enforcement, or penalties for employees who violate the policy.

For about an hour, board members debated the implications of such language.

“This is not about restricting debate in a school,” said Wurz. “This is about setting standards, which – although they are not definitive – would allow the administration to get the control they need to maintain school discipline in a day-to-day fashion.”

“I would argue that it would be possible to create a complete standard laying out everything that is allowed and not allowed,” Wurz added.

Resident Stacy Smith said the proposed "Advocacy Activities" policy was simply too vague and would “foster an atmosphere of intimidation and self-censorship.”

“What if a gay teacher is married and has a ring on their finger?” Smith asked. “Is that considered LGBTQ advocacy? Can a teacher even be openly gay in Pennridge?”

“Good teachers will want to leave and it will be harder to attract talent.”

Resident Kyle Esposito, of East Rockhill, accused the board of “encouraging controversy and rage” with such a proposal.

"You are the ones politicizing education," said Esposito. "You are the ones bringing your opinions into our classrooms."

Pennridge considers library policy similar to Central Bucks

The longest debate centered on the selection and removal of library materials. The district's superintendent repeatedly stated that he had faith in the school's librarians to select appropriate materials.

In December, a parents group accused the Pennridge School district of pulling from its shelves the book "Heather Has Two Mommies."

The book, written by Lesléa Newman in 1988, is about the title character being raised by her biological mother, Jane, and her partner, Kate.

At least 42 times, legislators and parents have made attempts to ban the book, according to the Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association.

Residents need to know what's in school libraries and more transparency is needed on book purchases, said board member Jordan Blomgren. Any list of the books planned for purchase should be placed on the school's website so that citizens can review the list and offer comment, she stated.

"One person should not be making the decisions about what goes into the library," said Wurz. "Are there checks and balances?"

"One person picking all the books is a recipe for disaster," Wurz said.

Librarians have supervisors who oversee their work in making sure libraries do not contain inappropriate materials, said Bolton.

Blomgren argued for a specific list of topics that should never appear in materials in elementary school libraries.

Bolton cautioned against specifics.

"To try and define the 'what ifs' just creates a different list of 'what ifs'," the superintendent said. Allowing the public to critique library book purchases could slow the process of acquiring new materials for the library, he said.

The Pennsylvania ACLU said it was currently monitoring actions to control libraries by school boards in a half dozen communities. But, Walczak said he was unaware of any district that sought to limit expression by students and employees.

"The school district will get sued and they will be on the hook to pay legal expenses for those who challenged these policies," said Walczak. "The government should not be in the business of telling people what they can and cannot say. This is the opposite of freedom."

School board hires attorney to oppose new voter plans

The PCDR plan would slice up the voting map into three regions. Three members from each region would be elected to a nine-member school board. Currently, the district holds at-large elections, meaning all voters cast ballots for each seat on the board.

James McGinnis

Bucks County Courier Times

USA TODAY NETWORK

Members of the Pennridge school board want a say in who can get elected to the Pennridge school board.

The board has hired an attorney to oppose plans for new voter districts in the educational system, which spans Bedminster, Dublin, Hilltown, Perkasie, Silverdale, Sellersville, East and West Rockhill townships.

On Nov. 28, Bucks County President Judge Wallace Bateman is scheduled to hear arguments in the case that is currently listed in court documents as a 'miscellaneous criminal hearing.' Despite the labeling, there are no criminal charges involved.

Hired by the school board, attorney Kevin Skjoldal, of the Harrisburg-based Eckert Seamans, will make arguments against new voter districts.

Members of the group Pennridge Citizens for Direct Representation had initiated the court action this summer, after collecting some 2,800 signatures from voters in the school district to change the way board members are elected.

The PCDR plan would slice up the voting map into three regions. Three members from each region would be elected to a nine-member school board. Currently, the district holds at-large elections, meaning all voters cast ballots for each seat on the board.

Supporters say it would allow for more direct representation in a school system that spans eight communities and nearly 100 square miles. Critics have said that they don't want a county judge deciding how the community votes.

Voter districts for school boards are common. Centennial, Council Rock, Central Bucks, Neshaminy, Palisades, Pennsbury and the Quakertown Area school districts each elect members via voting regions. New Hope-Solebury and Pennridge are the only regional school district in Bucks County with board members elected at-large and representing the entire community.

While school boards are nonpartisan, Democrats outnumber Republicans in only two voter precincts in the Pennridge School District, according to Bucks County Board of Elections statistics. And even in those districts, the advantage is slim.

In one Sellersville district, Democrats have an eight-person advantage among registered voters. In a second Sellersville voter district, Democrats lead by five

NEWS

Can Pennridge find compromise on teacher advocacy? Board member gives inside view on talks

**James McGinnis**

Bucks County Courier Times

Published 9:54 p.m. ET Sept. 6, 2022

A member of the Pennridge School Board is seeking compromise on a policy he says would ban teachers from placing any flags, icons, and other symbols on their desks.

In response to reports of social and political advocacy by a handful of educators, the school board could even ban teachers from placing family photos on desks inside classrooms, said board member Ronald Wurz said.

In a series of interviews, Wurz said that he was working behind the scenes on a compromise to avoid a policy that could lead to a total ban on teachers placing anything on desks in their classrooms.

This news organization contacted the eight other members of Pennridge school board for comment via email on Tuesday. None responded by Friday.

Meanwhile, Wurz, a small business owner from Bedminster, offered a candid — if not frustrated — look at politics in Pennridge.

Some of the board members are moving to extreme measures, which moderates don't support, said Wurz, a long-time Republican on an all-GOP school board.

Breaking with some conservatives, Wurz said he believes teachers should be allowed to demonstrate signs of support for LGBTQ+ students in the schools. The placement of a rainbow flag on a teacher's desk is not anti-Christian, he said.

“Imagine a ninth-grader coming into school with some sexuality issues, and they can't find a friend and don't know who to trust,” said Wurz. “Some people say that it's offensive to Christians, but I don't see that.”

Supporting students saves lives, advocates say. One study found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual students in grades seven through 12 were "more than twice as likely to have attempted suicide as their heterosexual peers," according to the CDC.

How has the discussion been across Pennridge School District and local communities?

Pennridge has already hosted a number of policy meetings and discussed teacher advocacy. Policy and curriculum committees will meet on Sept. 7 and Sept. 12. The next school board meeting is Sept. 27.

During an Aug. 1 policy meeting, school board president Joan Cullen said she believed that some students who are Christian might be offended by a teacher expressing support for LGBTQ+ students.

"If you have a rainbow, do you also have a Christian cross to make sure that you are welcoming to students of that faith?" Cullen asked.

When the board met on Aug. 22, some residents praised the board for enacting restrictions on teacher advocacy. Others asked the committee to reconsider.

"I'd like to thank the Pennridge School Board for supporting the parents who believe that values should be taught in the home and academics should be taught in the school," said Bob Sellers, vice president of the Pennridge Area GOP.

Raylene Vesh attended the meeting with her wife, Amy. Two of her children graduated from Pennridge, she said.

Vesh said she and her church would be praying for members of the school board to make the right decision and support students of all gender identities.

"LGBT people are a demographic," Vesh told the board. "We're not a political statement, and we're not a religion."

For Subscribers: Was Central Bucks underpaying women teachers? Judge OKs collective action for claims back to 2000

More: How hot is the real estate market in Bucks County? Home sale prices rise to \$460K

More: Pennridge board defends proposed speech policy against ire of parents, Bucks NAACP, others

No proposals on teacher advocacy have come to a vote and no action is likely until October, said Wurz. New board policies must be read allowed twice at public school board meetings prior to approval.

Pennridge School Board wants tough regulations on teacher advocacy

In June, the board first began internal discussions on teacher advocacy, student expression, and the selection of classroom and library materials. Policy discussions started after board members learned of a small number of teachers advocating for social causes in the classroom, Wurz said.

Those proposals resulted in criticism from the Bucks County NAACP, National Human Rights Campaign, National Coalition Against Censorship, and Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. If approved, the head of a Pennsylvania ACLU has said that organization would file a legal challenge in federal court.

It all started with a handful complaints, said Wurz.

“We have a small number [of teachers] who are advocating their opinions as facts,” he said. “If they teach their opinions as facts, then that’s a mistake and that’s something that has to be guarded against. But I think we’re heading in a different, Orwellian direction, where you just say nothing is allowed because you don’t want to make a decision on what’s appropriate.”

“Why are we putting restrictions on the 95 percent of teachers who do a good job?” he asked.

At board meetings, officials have pointed to an incident involving a middle-school English teacher who was educating students on the use of gender-defining pronouns. Changing pronouns is not allowed at Pennridge without the consent of the parents.

Most government workers are barred from talking politics on the job. Language under consideration in Pennridge would prohibit advocacy for any social causes.

Wurz said there was even talk among board members about family photos and whether teachers should have such images on their desks.

“We were discussing whether you could put a family photo on your desk,” said Wurz. “Well, what’s to prevent everybody in that photo from wearing LGBTQ symbols, and holding Pride flags, and putting that photo on your desk?”

Teachers are 'afraid to talk' while facing pushback

The Pennsylvania State Education Association teachers union declined comment on the proposals. Teachers are afraid to talk, said Wurz. And teacher advocacy restrictions will only lead to teachers leaving the district, he said.

"The teachers are worried, they're scared of how this will affect them. But they won't talk publicly," he said. "We're not the highest-paying school district and this just makes for another reason to shop around."

An electrical engineer, Wurz runs a small business as a real estate developer specializing in industrial sites. He was appointed to the Pennridge school board in April 2021 and elected in November to a two-year seat.

"I've been involved with business all my life, and I thought that school boards would be about guiding a process," he said. "I had no idea what I was getting into with this."

He expects push back for seeking compromise on teacher advocacy. He might lose his position on the board, but he believes teachers should be able to support students who need help.

"The alternative is to not allow anything [on desks], and that hurts certain segments of our population," he said. "These kids need a safe space."

LATEST HEADLINES

Pennridge School Board terminates Vermilion contract

Board cancels consulting contract with
Vermilion Education seven months after
hiring the controversial firm



The Pennridge school board votes to terminate its consulting contract with Vermilion Education, seven months after hiring the controversial firm to review the district's social studies curriculum. (John Worthington – MediaNews Group)





By **JOHN WORTHINGTON** |

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PUBLISHED: November 28, 2023 at 12:21 p.m. | UPDATED: November 28, 2023 at 12:22 p.m.

EAST ROCKHILL — In a stunning reversal, the Pennridge School Board Monday evening terminated its consulting contract with Vermilion Education LLC, seven months after [hiring the controversial firm](#) to “review and develop” the district’s K-12 social studies curriculum.

The move comes just one week before the board’s reorganization meeting, in which newly-elected board members will be seated. The incoming board will feature a new Democratic majority, who [swept the November election](#) on a [campaign to reverse](#) some of the board’s recent actions, including the hiring of Vermilion.

The contract’s termination caps off months of public outcry and explosive board meetings over the board’s decision to hire the fledgling consulting firm. Opposition centered on Vermilion founder Jordan Adams’ inexperience and ties to the conservative Hillsdale College, with parents accusing the board of attempting to indoctrinate students.

Despite vehement opposition from the public and some board members, the board majority [voted several times](#), as recently as October, to uphold the Vermilion contract.

Contract termination

At Monday’s meeting, the board’s Vermilion opponents appeared surprised at the motion to terminate the contract. While touting their support for the contract’s termination, they criticized the motion for including a \$5,000 invoice for Adams’ final curriculum report.

The 15-page report outlines Vermilion's findings from a review of various social studies and English courses in the school district. The report includes recommendations for "parental notification, balanced points of view or general reconsideration" regarding a number of reading materials as well as accusations of left-wing themes in the curriculum, including criticism of "traditional values," support for "unlimited immigration," and Critical Race Theory.

Board member Joan Cullen blasted the report as an "embarrassment."

"For someone to say that this is a professionally-produced report is laughable. It's basically a recitation of quotes that he pulled out of context," said Cullen. "I certainly do not want to give my stamp of approval to this report, because he will be able to walk away saying he had the support of the Pennridge School Board for this product."

Cullen continued by characterizing the Vermilion contract as a "grift," noting Adams' absence from the district since his June presentation.

"We have not seen hide nor hair of this man since June, yet you have paid him \$35,000 of Pennridge taxpayer money," said Cullen. "This is the biggest grift. Congratulations to him for managing to fool five of you, but I'm not gonna be fooled."

Board member Jordan Blomgren, who negotiated the Vermilion contract, countered by accusing Cullen and other Vermilion opponents of "selective outrage."

"We have spent so much money on previous consultants. There was never the same outrage, never questioning it at all," said Blomgren. "The selective outrage over the Vermilion contract is what is embarrassing."

She concluded by expressing hope that Adams' recommendations will still be considered by the district in order to root out "political bias" in the curriculum.

"It is my hope that the district will take Mr. Adams' reports and give more guidance to teachers to ensure that the delivery and discussion is even-handed," said Blomgren. "As a board member, I will continue to fight to keep bias, social justice activism, CRT and DEI out of our schools."

Following the board's discussion, the motion to terminate the contract was approved 5-0-4, with Blomgren and board members Ricki Chaikin, Megan Banis-Clemens, Bob Cormack and David Reiss voting in the majority and Cullen and board members Christine Batycki, Jonathan Russell and Ron Wurz abstaining.

“I want the record to reflect that Mr. Adams did not get the unanimous approval of the school board,” said Cullen.

“The reason this was on the agenda tonight is because of the community, so thank you,” said Wurz. “I’m thankful to not have to mention the word Vermilion again.”

Vermilion timeline

In April, Pennridge became the first school district in the country to contract with Vermilion Education. The firm was founded in late 2022 by Adams, a Michigan resident and graduate and former employee of Hillsdale College, a private conservative Christian college that has been criticized with claims of whitewashing U.S. history and promoting Christian nationalism. The contract paid Adams \$125 per hour plus travel and accommodation expenses, with no time or expense limits.

While Adams was initially hired to review and develop the K-12 social studies curriculum, his role was expanded to include the middle school Reading, English and Language Arts (RELA) curriculum. In June, Adams presented his curriculum recommendations to the board via Zoom, which included a shifting focus from native American to colonial American history, an increased emphasis on classics and the restriction of books with mature themes.

In August, one week before the beginning of the new school year, the board approved the new social studies curriculum written in collaboration with Adams. The curriculum included a new ninth grade civics, government and economics course in place of the early American history course. The change was condemned by teachers for containing age-inappropriate reading material and eliminating 19th century U.S. history instruction.

The curriculum also revamped the elementary social studies course of study, notably making Hillsdale lesson plans required texts for grades 3-5 social studies. The board eventually agreed to postpone the elementary curriculum until the 2024-2025 school year following concerns from teachers about inadequate preparation time.

The next month, the board approved new RELA curriculum written in collaboration with Adams, which replaced some contemporary books with classics and inspirational stories.



NEWS



Pennridge tells teachers to remove LGBTQ pride flags, crosses, and other ‘advocacy materials,’ per new policy

“All advocacy-related materials” should be removed by Oct. 4, including religious symbols, LGBTQ pride materials, abortion-related materials, political party symbols, or Ukrainian flags.

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A Progress Pride flag and rainbow flags.

Angela Weiss/AFP / MCT

by Oona Goodin-Smith

Published 24 minutes ago

A Bucks County school district has instructed teachers to remove all



and superintendent say will ensure the curriculum is “balanced, neutral, and comprehensive,” but civil rights groups warn will create a chilling effect in

classrooms with a disproportionate impact on LGBTQ students.

The memo to Pennridge School District staff comes [after its board opted Tuesday](#) night to bypass a second reading of a policy barring teachers from “advocacy” activities during the school day, fast-tracking a 7-2 vote on the contentious mandate.

In a staff email Wednesday, Pennridge Superintendent David Bolton highlighted the changes that would take place as a result of the advocacy policy, as well as new guidelines around classroom and library books.

“All advocacy-related materials” should be removed from district desks, walls, doors and hallways by Oct. 4, the e-mail said, including crosses and other

such as Ukrainian flags. The items should not be removed while students are in class.

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The email noted the policy doesn't prohibit staff from speaking with or supporting students and families or discussing advocacy-related matters when it applies to the school curriculum.

» **READ MORE:** [The Pennridge school board is debating policies including 'teacher advocacy.' Here's where those guidelines stand.](#)

In an interview, Bolton — a former math teacher — emphasized the policy does not affect what students are allowed to wear or what student clubs may display



meet with staff to clarify questions
around both the advocacy and resource
material new guidelines.

“It’s tough to use [advocacy] because that word means so many different things,” he said. “So if someone says to me, ‘Are you advocating for students?’ the answer is yes. But are we trying to persuade them to believe something? No.”

Under the new policy, Pennridge staff members may be allowed to wear pins or jewelry showing support for LGBTQ people, a political party, or a cross necklace, Bolton said. Larger symbols, like a pride flag on a T-shirt, for example, would not be allowed.

Studies show that spaces perceived to be

In a statement, Holly Pollock, president of the Pennridge Education Association, said the union remains committed to all students.

“While new policies may present changes throughout Pennridge School District, our members — the teachers, school nurses, librarians, counselors, social workers, and psychologists who serve Pennridge students — remain steadfast in our mission of ensuring our students feel welcomed, valued, and encouraged to excel as learners,” Pollock said.

Why did the board fast-track the vote?

School board members have said the advocacy policy — which had received

The nine-member, all-Republican board was slated to continue discussions on both the advocacy and resource policies Tuesday, with a second reading and final vote expected in late October. However, a majority of the board [voted Tuesday to suspend its own protocol.](#)

“The thought is that we’ve talked around and around and around, talked it to death, everybody has been heard,” said board president Joan Cullen, noting that the policies had already been discussed more than what’s typical. “And the thought is that we need to move on.”

Ronald Wurz, one of the two school board members who voted against the policies, said in a statement that the rushed decision “reduces the time

“It also makes a bad impression as we are stripping away the support for a marginalized group of kids and our solution is to clamp down on teacher advocacy,” Wurz, a district parent and small-business owner, continued. He added that he was not speaking on the school board’s behalf.

» **READ MORE:** [The Pennridge School District dropped its diversity program. Black families say the district isn’t acknowledging racism.](#)

Books with ‘sexualized content’

The board Tuesday also approved a policy on resource materials, which would require books and other classroom resources selected by librarians and

Bolton emphasized librarians will still select books for school libraries, and anything that requires the spending of

taxpayer money will be approved by the board, he said.

What has changed, he said, is that a list of books and materials recommended for purchase must be displayed online for at least two weeks, and that teachers must now obtain parent consent before students are assigned resources containing sexual content.

At the high school level, resource materials will not be allowed that include “visual sex acts or visually implied

procreative sex or STD avoidance. Bolton said that instruction addresses textbooks and falls in line with the district's existing health curriculum, which does

not teach about nonprocreative LGBTQ sex.

Books containing what is deemed “age-appropriate” heterosexual and LGBTQ sexual content may still be allowed in library books, he said.

Amid [a national surge in book-banning](#), Bolton stressed the resource policy is not a ban. “Educational institutions have constantly evaluated resource materials to make determinations about what’s appropriate. That has happened since the beginning of time,” he said.

» **READ MORE:** [Central Bucks has approved a library policy targeting ‘sexualized content’ in books. Here’s what we know.](#)

‘Not political ideas to be debated’



disproportionately affect LGBTQ students.

“It sends a message to the LGBTQ community that you know, something is

different about you. We have to be careful about even discussing you in school,” said Witold Walczak, legal director of the Pennsylvania ACLU.

Sharon Ward, senior policy adviser with the Education Law Center, called the advocacy policy “unconstitutional censorship” that “creates a chilling environment that will interfere with children’s ability to learn.”

“Students seek out trusted adults for support, and this policy will break that student-teacher bond,” Ward said.

“Sexual orientation and gender identity are not political ideas to be debated, they are real children who attend Pennridge schools every day.”

Both the Education Law Center and the Pennsylvania ACLU have said they are



nationwide movement against LGBTQ pride flags and content in schools, and a week after a Pennsylvania lawmaker introduced legislation to ban conversations around sexual orientation and gender identity in commonwealth classrooms.

» **READ MORE:** [Central Bucks parents protest removal of Pride flags and other actions they say are hostile to LGBTQ students](#)

Bolton said the district's policies do not change "how important every student is to the ... collective community."

"Whether it be the LGBTQ+ community or whether it be any other identification for students, they're all continued to be important: their voices as well as what they bring to the Pennridge community."

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