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POLITICS

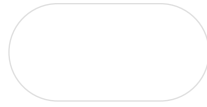
How the Far Right Took Over a Pennsylvania School Board—And How Parents Took It Back

“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

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<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**.*
