

NEWS

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



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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."

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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."