

LOCAL

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



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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.

