

EDUCATION

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



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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.

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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."

