

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.



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

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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.

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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.

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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."

Published Sept. 29, 2022



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I cover news, with a focus on K-12 education in Philadelphia's suburbs.



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