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Dear Dr. Lucabaugh & Central Bucks School Board,

I am Dr. Audrey Ervin, a Doylestown psychologist, university professor, and parent of a CBSD child. My clinical and research expertise focus on multicultural competence with a particular emphasis on sexual orientation and gender expansive identities. I am nationally certified Stop the Hate trainer, a member of the American Psychological Association, Pennsylvania Psychological Association, and past spokesperson for the Association for Women in Psychology. I am frequently cited in various media outlets including Time magazine, NBC News, and Psychology Today, and hold certificates from the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard.

Banning Pride flags is wrong, shortsighted and goes against what the bulk of psychological research tells us: representation and safe spaces are critical to the mental health of sexual and gender minority youth. I often work with LGBTQA+ folx who are in the process of coming out. Visual symbols such as the Pride flag normalize various identities, send clear messages of affirmation and safety, and assist folx to connect with allies. Safe spaces were created to combat the hostile, homophobic and transphobic sentiments that plague our society.

CBSD has a well-documented history of LGBTQA+ students reporting bullying, discrimination and harassment. Actions matter, not empty words of “support.” Removing Pride flags sends a very clear message to youth who are already at high risk for suicide, substance abuse, depression and anxiety: you are not welcome. Furthermore, it emboldens bullies to engage in discrimination and hatred.

Banning Pride flags to protect educators and staff who feel uncomfortable equates to knowingly participating in structural invisibility, silencing and invalidation for LGBTQA+ students. Training educators and staff to better understand LGBTQA+ identities and create inclusive classrooms must be the priority, not engaging in the direct institutional marginalization of at-risk students.

The personal is always political because identities cannot be extracted from political systems. It is naïve, myopic and dangerous to remove Pride flags from schools. Removing Pride flags is a political act, and it **goes against the best practice recommendations of every professional health organization** advocating for better mental health outcomes for LGBTQA+ youth.

The American Psychological Association publishes a primer for principles, educators and school personnel entitled, “Just the Facts about Sexual Orientation and Youth” that states,

“To be able to provide an accepting environment, school personnel need to understand the nature of sexual orientation development and be supportive of healthy development for all youth. If school environments become more positive for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, it is likely that their differences in health, mental health, and substance abuse risks will decrease” (APA, 2021, p.4).

Current research indicates that LGBTQA+ youth are in crisis more so than any recent time in history. When compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers, LGBTQA+ youth have much higher rates of suicide. Banning symbols of affirmation for this one specific marginalized group is appalling and the potential for severe consequences is very real.

A 2021 Trevor Project survey of LGBTQA+ youth queried almost 35,000 youth ages 13-24 across the United States and found:

“42% of LGBTQA+ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, including more than half of transgender and nonbinary youth.

70% of LGBTQA+ youth stated that their mental health was "poor" most of the time or always during COVID-19.

75% of LGBTQ youth reported that they had experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity at least once in their lifetime.” (2021, Trevor Project, p1.)

LGBTQA+ students deserve a safe place to learn. Removing the Pride flag is a clear statement of CBSD’s unwillingness to follow best practices associated with LGBTQA+ mental health. To the best of my knowledge, CBSD is the only local school district to take such bold and potentially harmful action.

It is imperative that the Pride flag ban be reversed. I implore the board to make informed decisions **based on current research and mental health best practices**. Be part of the solution, not the problem.

Respectfully,

Audrey Ervin, Ph.D.
Psychologist

References

American Psychological Association. (2021, September 13). *Just the facts about sexual orientation and youth: A primer for school personnel*.
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The Trevor Project (2021). *Trevor National Survey on LGBTQA+ Mental Health*.
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Dear Dr. Lucabaugh & CBSD School Board Members,

I am writing to you regarding your recent decision to ban the LGBTQ+ Pride Flag in Central Bucks Schools. I have many ties to the CB school system. I am a parent to 2 children who will attend CB East in the Fall. I am a practicing Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) in Doylestown, where I work with many students and adults who are members of the LGBTQ+ community. I am the chair of the Pennsylvania Association for Marriage and Family Therapists. Additionally, I am an Associate Professor of Counseling Psychology at Delaware Valley University, where I teach and mentor the next generation of mental health providers. Many of these students are both CB alumni and members of the LGBTQ+ community. The opinions I share with you here are my own – I do not speak for any of these organizations. Instead, I speak from over 20 years of professional experience. That experience makes it clear: the decision to remove Pride flags from the school community is a harmful one.

We know that life is difficult for today's youth, for a variety of reasons. Suicide is the 3rd highest cause of death for youth ages 15-19 (CDC, 2020 - <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/adolescent-health.htm>), and the 2nd highest cause of death in Pennsylvania for people aged 10 – 34 (CDC, 2018). In 2021, 45% of American LGBTQ+ youth aged 13-24 seriously considered killing themselves. (The Trevor Project, 2022 - <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/article/facts-about-lgbtq-youth-suicide/>). If you click through the Trevor Project link, you'll find this powerful statement: *"LGBTQ youth are not inherently prone to suicide risk because of their sexual orientation or gender identity but rather placed at higher risk because of how they are mistreated and stigmatized in society."* Your ban makes CBSD part of that mistreatment and stigmatization.

Make no mistake – that is exactly what this ban on Pride flags is. Another message sent to LGBTQ+ youth that they are not welcome. While mental health struggles and suicide are complicated experiences, there are some simple trends we can observe. LGBTQ+ youth (and indeed all people) are at high risk of poor mental health outcomes and suicide when they experience discrimination, bullying, and isolation. Those same LGBTQ+ folks, when they experience positive social support, have LGBTQ+ mentors, and exist in communities with inclusive norms and policies see **decreased** risk for severe mental health issues and suicidal ideation, attempts, and completion (<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/fostering-the-mental-health-of-lgbtq-youth/>).

Do we want CBSD to be a place that includes all students or excludes students? A community that protects youth or endangers youth? It baffles me that the leaders of this school district might think otherwise.

CBSD is no stranger to the problem of youth suicide. In the past several years, there have been no fewer than 3 LGBTQ+ CBSD students attempt and/or complete suicide. There is no way to be sure how many others have thought about taking their own life. It is bad enough LGBTQ+ students must endure bullying from a small but loud subset of their peers, but also from their superintendent and school board.

The cited reason for the Pride flag ban is that the symbol is “divisive.” That’s an odd statement. The Pride flag represents a safe place for LGBTQ+ folks to exist and be themselves. In a world and a school district that thinks so poorly of them, they need these spaces. These spaces, and the supportive adults and peers who inhabit them, are **suicide prevention**. Those who choose to fly the flag are saying “I support your right to exist as you are.” The so-called “divisiveness” related to this is caused by those who would prefer to deny LGBTQ+ folks the right to exist as they are. If you are standing on the side of those who want to deny others the right to exist, **you are standing on the wrong side**.

Supporting LGBTQ+ youth costs us nothing. Something as simple as a Pride flag can help save a life. I hope you and the board reconsider this dangerous and harmful policy and allow CBSD schools to be a safe place for our LGBTQ+ youth.

Sincerely,

Matthew S. Mutchler, Ph.D., LMFT

CBSD Resident