

Inclusive and Welcoming Schools for ALL Students

WHERE WE CAME FROM

Central Bucks, like almost every other school, has had profound problems with the bullying of LGBTQ students. This is a longstanding, worrying issue with grievous effects. We know that affirming school environments are associated with reduced suicide risk among LGBTQ youth. We know from a study conducted by the Trevor Project in 2020 that LGBTQ youth who reported having at least one LGBTQ-affirming space had 35% reduced odds of reporting a suicide attempt in the past year.

The 2021 National School Climate Survey reports that over 81% of LGBTQ+ students felt unsafe at school because of actual or perceived personal characteristics.

A group of educators from professional educator preparation programs at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education states "When educators recognize barriers to creating safe learning communities or barriers to students' education, we must do what is in our power to remove those barriers."

In Fall 2022, The Education Law Center urged the Board to reject one such barrier, Policy 321, because they found it overbroad, discriminatory, and plainly intended to chill educators' support for LGBTQ+ students: "These vague and overbroad proposed changes will likely serve to censor educators from facilitating critical lessons and discussions with students about historical events and discrimination, current political and cultural concerns."

Despite Penn educators' warning that the policy would raise barriers rather than remove them, and the Education Law Center's warning that the policy amounts to unconstitutional censorship, our current school board majority voted to enact policy 321, which conflates belief systems, like religion or political affiliation, with facts inherent to being human, such as one's gender identity or sexual orientation, and then bans all political, partisan, and sociopolitical décor and discussion outside of curriculum. We know their original intent because their initial draft specifically referenced gender identity and sexual orientation as topics prohibited from discussion unless directly related to the curriculum. Under advice from legal advisors, this was changed, but the intent of the policy had been made clear.

Advocates for Inclusive Education

Position Paper: Inclusive & Welcoming Schools, June 2023

WHERE WE ARE NOW

According to policy 321, teachers are prohibited from displaying Pride flags, although the enforcement on this appears to be lax, differing from building to building, which raises the question of equality of opportunity for our students. With a blanket prohibition on instruction and study concerning partisan, political, or social policy issues outside of the curriculum, policy 321 takes aim at broader discussions of identity and cultural matters and chills educators' ability to teach confidently without fear.

In short, policy 321 fits within the context of the current movement toward censorship and control by seeking to limit or suppress the inclusion of the voices, needs, and experiences of many marginalized groups, along with the supports necessary for academic success.

WE BELIEVE

- Every student comes to school to learn. Research shows that academic learning is only possible when the student feels a sense of safety, belonging, and intrinsic worth.
- We do not see how displaying a Pride flag or symbol can hurt anyone.
- Pride flags or symbols are not activism, but this policy makes them so.
- Pride flags or symbols are not political, but this policy makes them so.
- Pride flags or symbols do not show favoritism. They do not signal one group of kids is more important than another; they simply make a quiet statement of welcome to those who might wonder if they belong.
- Pride flags or symbols do not suggest that kids ought to accept LGBTQ lifestyles for themselves, nor to adopt any identity inauthentic to themselves. They merely symbolize acceptance of the human beings who identify with the LGBTQ community, something this community has said helps them in school. This is about human beings living in tolerance with one another: nothing more, nothing less.

Advocates for Inclusive Education

Position Paper: Inclusive & Welcoming Schools, June 2023

WHERE WE WANT TO GO

- We want to go back to the old policy 321, whose original purpose was to prohibit partisan political activity by teachers and to make clear that district staff was not to use work time or district resources to promote their own political actions or campaigns. It left classroom décor up to the teachers, who know best what posters, flags, and other visual aids will support their curriculum and the welfare and education of their students.
- Restore safe learning environments by allowing employees to post in their classrooms, offices, or halls a rainbow flag or other sign of support for LGBTQ students or staff, because these are established symbols of inclusion and support that will help our kids. These can help marginalized kids feel safe, supported, and ready to learn.
- Uphold students' right to use their requested names and pronouns. Establish a comprehensive school policy that carefully balances both the protection of a student's right to privacy in instances where they express concern for their safety and encourages parental input when the student consents.
- Update CB's Equal Opportunity/Non-Discrimination policy to include gender identity and gender expression.
- Repeal policy 109.2 which is so out of the norm that it allows for the easy removal of books and replace with it with a standard library policy that balances each family's unquestioned right to guide their own children's reading with every other family's right for their kid to read high quality, age-appropriate literature freely and according to their interests.
- Repeal policy 321, which creates more fear than guidance, as we saw in the debacle over Elie Weisel, and instead create Best Practices and in-service workshops for teachers to share their methods of keeping balance in classroom discussion and protecting all kids' right to think for themselves.
- Provide professional development and training specific to anti-LGBTQ bullying and harassment, so that all district employees are trained how to recognize and respond to situations targeting vulnerable students.
- Hire more mental health counselors.

Advocates for Inclusive Education

Position Paper: Inclusive & Welcoming Schools, June 2023

- Hire a Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging who can help guide and facilitate challenging conversations about race and gender so we can achieve a greater understanding about how to help more kids thrive in school. This would include any group that parents believe are experiencing marginalization, including religious kids.
- Join Delaware Valley Consortium for Excellence & Equity (DVCEE) to learn how to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities.
- Support & implement PA Department of Ed culturally-relevant learning standards that bring real world experiences into the classroom.