

## **NAACP, PairUP Society, and Bucks County Families File Federal Civil Rights Complaint Challenging Discriminatory School Policies**

Several Bucks County families have joined with civil rights and advocacy groups to file [a federal civil rights complaint](#) on behalf of parents and students in the Pennridge School District, challenging the District’s discriminatory policies and its “hostile environment rife with race- and sex-based harassment.”

The complaint, filed today to the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) in the U.S. Department of Education and the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, alleges racially discriminatory and anti-LGBTQ+ policies and practices in Pennridge schools, including a failure to address bullying of students of color and LGBTQ+ students, curriculum changes designed to remove discussion of racism and oppression from classrooms, banning of books that represent diverse experiences, and discriminatory bathroom and sports policies. The complaint asks the District to directly address race- and sex-based harassment to ensure that it does not recur and to adopt policies that affirmatively foster the inclusion of marginalized students.

The complaint was filed on behalf of the Bucks County NAACP, the PairUP Society, and affected families by the Education Law Center-PA and the Advocacy for Racial and Civil Justice Clinic of the University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School.

“For years, teachers, students of color, and LGBTQ+ students have reported race- and sex-based harassment, including students routinely using the N-word toward Black students and students threatening violence against LGBTQ+ students,” the complaint states. “But District officials have refused to remedy the systemic and pervasive forms of race- and sex-based harassment.”

“All students deserve safety and dignity at school,” said Karen Downer, president of the Bucks County NAACP, an organization represented in the complaint. “Unfortunately, Pennridge has created an environment that is hostile for some students because of their race, sex, or gender identity.” Title VI and Title IX of the Civil Rights Act prohibit discrimination based on these characteristics, and schools are legally required to take action when they are notified of a hostile environment that prevents some groups of students from fully participating in educational opportunities.

In an investigation that led to the filing of the complaint, advocates spoke to students who described persistent harassment that went unaddressed by administrators, in some cases pushing affected students to switch to online learning or to leave the District entirely. Because of privacy concerns, portions of the stories shared in the complaint are redacted, but they include students of color who faced racist comments at school, as well as LGBTQ+ students who experienced slurs, harassment, and threats of violence.

In response to her child’s experience hearing racial slurs and threats at school, Pennridge parent Adrienne King founded the PairUP Society, a nonprofit that supports underrepresented students facing bullying in schools. “No child should have to choose between their safety and their education,” she said. “Pennridge School District has a duty to protect students of all identities so that they are not prevented from learning simply because of who they are.”

Advocates say that Pennridge has failed to address race- and sex-based harassment, instead exacerbating the hostile environment by disbanding Diversity Equity and Inclusion initiatives, prohibiting teachers

from displaying pride flags, limiting discussion of racism in the social studies curriculum, and removing diverse reading materials from the library.

“Our thanks to the brave students and advocates who have faced callous, hostile, and harmful school environments for years but did not give up in the fight to make their school communities better,” said attorney Ashli Giles-Perkins of the Education Law Center. “Pennridge School District has to address the racial and LGBTQ+ discrimination that continues to plague its school community. The situation calls for strong interventions from the federal government.”

“We hope that this lawsuit will be a step towards ensuring future students of all identities can learn and thrive at Pennridge schools,” said Annamarie Hufford-Bucklin, a Penn Carey Law student in the Advocacy for Racial and Civil Justice Clinic who worked on the complaint.

“The District has an obligation to comply with the Civil Rights Act and to ensure an environment that is inclusive and welcoming to all,” said Keith Matier, a law student in the Advocacy for Racial and Civil Justice Clinic who also worked on the complaint.

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