

## NEWS

# Parents say Pennridge sent anti-LGBTQ message by restricting children's book



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A decision to pull a 30-year-old LGBTQ children's book from Pennridge School District's libraries has some residents like Priscilla Gray-Stoll "angry, insulted and very sad."

Social media posts that the district pulled Heather Has Two Mommies from its elementary school libraries earlier this month drove some demanding the book's return during a more than three-hour committee meeting on diversity and inclusion last Monday.

"My children grew up with that book. They are 29 and 30, and how about that, they are amazing adults that are contributing to society — and they have two mommies," Stoll, of Perkasio, said last week.

"How is it that Pennridge has this reputation of being homophobic and racist and anti-Semitic? Well, this is it. There we are," Stoll added.

Images of emails between area parents and school district officials earlier in December show the book was available at most of the district's seven elementary school libraries but were recently only available upon request to the school's guidance counselor.

The book, written by Lesléa Newman in 1988, is about the title character being raised by her biological mother, Jane, and her partner, Kate.

Heather becomes upset when she learns that her family is different from some of her playmates' families, and Heather's teacher instructs the class to draw pictures of their families to share with the class.

The book ends with Heather's playmates showing a variety of families, the teacher concluding that "it doesn't matter how many mommies or how many daddies your family

has ... the most important thing about a family is that all the people in it love each other.”

Newman has said she wrote the book after a conversation with a mother in a same-sex relationship who said there were no books for young children representing her daughter’s family.

Since its initial publication, the book has faced numerous challenges to remove it from public and school libraries over the decades.

A Twitter post made by a columnist for this news organization about the book’s removal earlier this month even drew a response from Newman herself.

“It’s 1992 all over again,” Newman wrote.

The American Library Association estimates the book has been targeted by 42 lawmakers and parents across the country and rated it the ninth most challenged book of the 1990s.

Stoll and several others at the Pennridge CommUnity Committee meeting, like Stacey Smith, also of Perkasio, are asking for answers on district policies on removing library books.

Smith said Tuesday in a phone interview she first heard about a supposed list of books being removed through online “chatter,” but Newman’s book is the only one confirmed at this time.

“It just feels wrong. To move books like that to some other section that’s only available through parental consent sends a message that having two mommies is wrong,” Smith said.

Smith, parent of a second-grader in the district, described the move as a “discriminatory directive” that lacked transparency to the recently formed CommUnity Committee, a board with a goal of addressing inequity and diversity.

The board was formed earlier in 2021 consisting of 17 community members and three Pennridge board directors as a replacement to the district’s now defunct Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) committee.

The DEI committee was dissolved in a school board vote in August, nearly 18 months after it was created, with some school officials citing “missteps” that were blamed on a lack of direction from the district.

**What is, and isn't, Critical Race Theory:** Analysis: What is critical race theory, and could it be taught in Pennsylvania schools?

**The job ahead for new school boards:** After contentious elections, new school boards in Bucks County get down to business. Here's what they're facing

An Ad Hoc committee that would become the CommUnity Committee was formed, with current school board Vice President David Reiss as its chairman joined by President Joan Cullen and director Megan Banis-Clemens.

Most of last week's regular committee business was focused on drafting the committee's mission statement, when discussion over the definition of the word "equity" took up most of the meeting agenda.

Committee Member Melissa Burger, a librarian for an elementary school in the Central Bucks School District, said the book's removal seemed to her to be "unconstitutional" and discriminatory.

"(Heather Has Two Mommies is) a very developmentally appropriate book for that age group ... and there's no reason why that shouldn't be in the library," Burger said.

Burger added that parents can individually request a school not allow their children access to certain books, but the constitutional problem comes when the district puts a barrier of access for all students.

Banis-Clemens chastised Burger over her comments, saying she made allegations about the district without knowing all the facts involved.

"You're making a lot of assertions ... it's not responsible to be going after something if we don't know the facts," Banis-Clemens said.

Book banning, often targeting works focused on LGBTQ or racial issues, has been a growing issue in school districts in Pennsylvania and across the country in recent months.

Texas Republican State Rep. Matt Krause sent a letter to the Texas Education Agency in late October asking if any schools had books, he listed on a 16-page spreadsheet, and how much money schools spent on those books.

The inquiry sparked confusion for targeted school districts across the state and outcry from education library advocates who worry it could lead to censorship or have a "chilling

effect," the Austin American-Statesmen reported on Oct. 29.

**Book ban in Central York:** Central York school board votes unanimously to rescind book ban: 'It has taken far too long'

The Central York School District in York County, Pennsylvania, made national headlines in September after students and parents pushed back on a year-long “freeze” on loaning out books related to racism and diversity to students.

A group that formed in November focusing on “sexually explicit” books in the Central Bucks School District has also expanded with its aim now apparently to go across the commonwealth.

The group previously known as Woke Bucks County rebranded itself as Woke PA with a domain name change on Dec. 14, according to registry information for [www.wokepa.com](http://www.wokepa.com).

Created a month earlier, Woke’s website began specifically focused on about 10 books with graphic depictions of sex, stories of abuse and drug use.

The self-described “grassroots” group’s website has stated its goal is to “reclaim our schools from activists promoting harmful agendas.”

"Gender Queer: A Memoir," by Maia Kobabe, featured prominently on the group’s list. It includes images of five pages of the 240-page graphic novel that include nudity and conversations about sexuality.

**More on Woke PA:** Central Bucks district book ban? What 'Woke Bucks County' wants in its effort to 'reclaim our schools'

**TikTok school scare:** Alleged TikTok safety threat prompts Bucks County schools to ramp up security

## **More efforts to remove books in Bucks County and beyond**

Tara Lehmann, a spokeswoman for Oni Press Inc., the book’s publisher, said previously Kobabe’s autobiographical comic is a vital resource for young people in the LGBTQ community and beyond.

Since this news organization first reported on the website, Woke has added another section of several books about school shootings, both fiction and non-fiction, in Central

Bucks Schools.

Woke's website said it added the new section in Central Bucks following a TikTok challenge that encouraged students to commit shootings on Dec. 17, and to recent school shootings in general.

"...We at WokePA can not support books that in great detail describe School Shootings. We feel it gives potential school shooters notes on how to do these horrible acts," the website states.

One book, "No Easy Answers: the truth behind death at Columbine," was written by Brooks Brown, a 1999 graduate of Columbine and long-time friend of Dylan Klebold, one of the two shooters who killed 13 classmates and injuring over 20 others before killing themselves.

Brown discusses the aftermath of the shooting, including suspicions that he was involved with Klebold's and Eric Harris' shooting.

Woke has also added to its website sections for Council Rock School District and Upper Perkiomen School District in Montgomery County.

The two newest districts so far only have sections naming sexually explicit books, several included in the same list in Central Bucks.

One of the main titles focused on in Council Rock and Upper Perkiomen is *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, a 1993 Nobel Award winning author.

**CBSD cuts raises Sunshine concerns:** Central Bucks cuts anti-racist training from agenda, raising Sunshine Act concerns

Woke's website includes a number of excerpts from Morrison's book, set during the Great Depression, where a main character, 9-year-old Pecola Breedlove, is sexually assaulted by her father.

Some of those excerpts are read aloud by several parents during an October meeting of the Upper Perkiomen school board that was posted on Woke's website.

The parents at that meeting demanded the board pull *The Bluest Eye* and a handful of other books from the library and conduct an investigation into how arrived in the first place.

Graphic and disturbing though it may be, Morrison's first published novel has been praised and defended as an accurate, albeit fictional, world of Black experience at that time in American history.

Back in Pennridge, Smith said she and other parents of the Upper Bucks district of roughly 7,200 students plan to keep showing up at meetings until Pennridge clarifies its policies on library books.

Smith pointed to the backlash in York that led to that district's policy change as a benchmark for success.

If nothing else, Smith said she and other parents hoped to keep pressure on the school board to bring more transparency on how books are removed from its libraries.

"Where are they getting their counsel from on what books to pull? Are they basing this off the list they're using in Texas? That needs to be made public at the very least," Smith said Tuesday.