

Good evening superintendent Moore, Chair Mahaffey & board members. I'm Kristel Behrend, one of the proud librarians at Knightdale High School and mother of two wake county graduates.

I'd like to talk to you about the revisions for policies 3200 and 3210, selection of instructional materials & the challenge policy. As you take on this task, some of which is necessary, I'd like to remind you of a few things: your librarians are professionals with masters degrees, your teachers are curriculum experts, and literacy is the foundation of a strong education.

Regarding 3210, we have always had a very strong & transparent challenge policy in Wake. I hope you will continue to uphold this policy filled with checks and balances while also putting much needed limits in place, limits that could avoid our library media staff from being bogged down in a quagmire of repeat challenges purely designed to waste resources. This board can and should make revisions to policy but should not seek to overreach power and override policy.

I have a few concerns about some of the language in policy 3200, specifically concerning read-alouds. The fact that selection of read-alouds is singled out as something that must be done in collaboration with others implies a lack of trust for our professionals' knowledge and understanding of age-relevant literature. What's even more concerning is the amount of self-censorship that will happen as a result of this addition. Surely you are aware that one of the best ways to improve literacy is by reading to children. Yet if I'm a first grade teacher with 5 minutes left in class before buses are called, am I going to grab a book that isn't pre-approved or just let the kids play on their technology? Would I read a beautiful book like "And Tango Makes Three" or do I fear retribution for sharing a beautiful, true story of two male penguins raising an egg that could be labeled "pervasively vulgar?"

In 2020 there were 223 unique titles challenged across the nation. Enter the famous list by a Texas lawmaker and by 2021 there were 1858 titles while 2022 saw 2571 unique titles challenged... just a bit of an increase following that political ploy. We could probably get Vegas odds for the number in 2023. Those are just the documented challenges - this doesn't even touch the insidious self-censorship that stems from fear.

As you rewrite these policies, ask yourselves what the fallout may be.

I want this board to stand up for intellectual freedom. I want you to assure your teachers and librarians that you believe in our professionalism & the work we are

doing. I want you to assure ALL parents that their children and their families will be represented honestly in our literature. And I want you to assure students that you do respect their first amendment right to access high quality literature.

Good things are happening in our libraries - they are safe and joyful places where everyone is welcome and has access to representative literature. Acknowledge this by writing policies that reflect our work.

As a 24 year veteran teacher, I grew up and got my education degree during a time when we were taught that color shouldn't exist in the classroom - the term colorblind might be familiar to some of you about my age. Students were just students no matter where they came from and we were told to treat them all equally, to celebrate our commonalities. My first job was in rural Ohio, teaching students who looked similar to me yet were from various socioeconomic backgrounds, so my lack of diversity training wasn't a huge deal in my early years. I interviewed for a position near Cleveland and was asked if I was called to teach in an inner city school. My answer was pretty vague, because I was called to be a teacher and I felt like it didn't matter where I taught or who I taught. Thankfully I didn't get that job where I would've brought my unconscious biases into the classroom, and I would have been unprepared to teach truly diverse students.

I am so thankful that my children had a different experience in Wake County Public Schools. I love that Wake County has magnet programs aimed at diversifying schools, that we celebrate our uniqueness, that we offer equity trainings with uncomfortable conversations that may help us be better for our students, that we offer instructional materials that allow us to have access to stories that can grow empathy, that we are willing to do the hard work of putting an Equity Policy in writing.

Today, on the fourth day of LGBTQ History Month and disability awareness month, I am here tonight filled with hope that the Equity Policy discussed earlier today will come to fruition with the updated, inclusive language of our LGBTQ+ students, our special education students, and our English Language Learners. This policy has the potential to define how WCPSS views Equity.

We all know that equity is not the same as equal where everything is the same no matter what you bring to the table. I'm sure you've all seen the image of the two kids picking apples with the same size ladder, yet one kid still can't reach the apples. Equity is making sure they both have the tools they need to succeed. How equitable would it be for a student with a visual impairment to be asked to read in the same way

as their peers. How equitable is it if male students are given a safe environment, free of discrimination based on gender, while our female students continue to have lower performance in male-dominated fields and subjects and our transgender students fear exclusion, bathrooms, and simple acceptance. It would be terribly inequitable to ask our LGBTQ+ students to refrain from “saying gay” while our heterosexual students are allowed to be their true selves.

Our students need to feel safe, they need to feel accepted and seen, and they need to know that the adults in their lives are willing to stand up and advocate for those needs. No matter what happens this November, we will still have students who are LGBTQ+, have special education needs, have language learning needs, and are facing a whole list of other identity intersections that may layer to contribute to systems of oppression. Just give the kid a taller ladder.

I hope that this policy will show our families and our students that “We See You” and “We will make sure you have what you need to learn in our public schools.”

Thank you for your time, attention and hard work.

Today is the first public board meeting of June when we celebrate PRIDE month. I'm proud to work at a school where we are visible in our efforts to show our students that we are safe and judgment free. We may not be in session right now at KHS, but our library worked with our GSA club to create an early PRIDE display in May. Those kids were so motivated. They created an amazing 3D Ally flag in the makerspace with all kinds of recycled materials, including old VHS film. We even had one of our KNIT WIT LIT club members knit a stripe. And one student did this amazing information board on the anti-trans legislation sweeping our nation, state by state. Unfortunately, that board will need to be updated as North Carolina entertains its own HB755. This display was a collaboration, designed and driven by kids who are passionate about their rights and proud of who they are, many who got there after some bumpy journeys.

The thing about being part of the LGBTQ community is that just because they are proud at this moment, doesn't mean they will continue to be so. They will have to make the decision to be seen by every new person they meet. They will be judged by some, called names and discriminated against by others, and disliked sight unseen just for who they are. So, yes, PRIDE month is an important affirmation to remind our LGBTQ students and staff to continue to be proud of who they are.

I'm excited to be volunteering at the first APEX pride this Saturday, but I was dismayed to hear that the Apex Festival Commission made the decision not to do drag story hour. They reacted out of fear, because they've been receiving threats. Since when do we take away from the many because the few are allowed to get away with threatening someone. Since when do teachers resign amid threats with no apparent consequence to those making the threats. Since when does our school believe it's entire parent base is made up of families who have a far right conservative view.

I want a school system that I can be proud of, one that stands for Core Belief #5 and one that will stand behind, supporting, and in front of, protecting those teachers that are in the classrooms making core belief 5 come to life. I want to be a proud employee of a public school system that affirms all identities, all students, and all families without apology or age restrictions. I want to be proud of my school district for taking a stand and putting in writing solid rules and procedures for how to make sure we are following policy 1710 with regards to our LGBTQ students, so that perceived LGBTQ friendliness is not inconsistent building to building. I want to be proud to work in a district that knows and affirms the value of PRIDE month.

We cannot let those who threaten us dictate how we operate. We cannot let hate win. We serve the public and our public has a strong LGBTQ community. We're not putting them back in a closet until after 3rd grade.

Library Rally Comments:

Today I want to talk about rights - 1st amendment rights that are being taken away all over the nation. And right now, the rational voters are not angry enough. I saw a tshirt that said history sighs, repeats itself. I wonder how long it took the Germans to get angry the 1920s. When Hitler took blatantly took over the media - we no longer have a firewall between meets and big money in America & the misinformation machine continues to make its rounds, did they get angry when Jews were portrayed negatively in the media - librarians have been called pornographers and pedophiles - did they cry out at the massive book burnings - we just had one in Tennessee in 2022 and the censorship speakers have been deafening at board meetings - how about when he took over education and controlled what kids learned - TX just passed a house bill limiting the speech of teachers and pulling over 850 books for analysis - what about when he made it a crime to criticize the government - Florida has made it a crime to say gay in elementary schools. Censorship is just the first step in a much bigger plan to discredit and dismantle education and then homogenize our thinking, our identities, our values - the death of democracy - perhaps this sounds dramatic but we are witnessing the effects of what happens when we allow extremist politicians to get elected. We have to get angry and we have to vote.

I'd like to thank you for allowing this extraordinary young woman, Gabriella Burwell, our NC Poetry Out Loud state champ to take my spot this evening. KHS is proud to have the state champ for the 2nd year in a row. Superintendent Moore did a great job telling you about Bella's amazing news earlier, but I also want to highlight our theater teacher, Mr. Raines who has worked tirelessly to help her merge literature and performance. You're in for a treat... Bella.

Hello... My name is Kristel Behrend, one of the librarians at Knightdale High School and a strong ally for all of our students and staff. Before I begin, I would like to give a shout out to the TGIF team at Knightdale High School, Jennifer, Geof, Brian, Jessica, Laura, and Alisia - we are so excited to have earned the Learning Innovation award for our professional learning model from NCTIES. This team has been one of the amazing collaborations to come out of COVID. Your librarians, staff, and students are doing good things and you should be proud.

Last night I had the pleasure to attend a session with authors and student activists who are passionate about their 1st amendment rights. The students in PA tried to make their voices heard, but were forced to turn to protesting to overturn a decision by Central York's Board of Education to pull an entire "Diversity" list of books, an action they did without the support of policy.

It's not surprising that this list had books that spoke to the authentic experiences of BIPOC and members of the LGBTQ+ community. They pulled them with the intent of reviewing them as a board even though there were 4 pages' worth of resources that were curated by their own professionals. Needless to say, they didn't have time to do this. I would say that their board overstepped their bounds and their expertise.

Librarians in Wake County have master's degrees in Library Science, are trained in book selection and collection management, and are in tune with the demographics of their schools - and they do, in fact, read many many books. These library professionals follow board policy 3200:D in choosing materials - researching, reading reviews and working to ensure that their collection fulfills their collection management plan and that all students feel represented.

We don't avoid adding books to our collections because they are uncomfortable. Race relations in Texas in the 1930s were uncomfortable - Out of Darkness. Being brown in America is uncomfortable - Lawn Boy. Identifying as non-binary in a binary culture is uncomfortable - Gender Queer. War, abuse, suicide, police brutality, and violence - these are headlines and they are all uncomfortable. Banning books doesn't change that.

When we leave our comfort zones in the safety of a book, we grow, and so do our students. They learn to think critically through deep exploration and hopefully even hard conversations at home.

This trend of censorship that's sweeping our nation stems from fear and while it doesn't hurt book sales, it does hurt the people reflected in those books - our students - by making them feel like there is something shameful about their identity. We hurt our LGBTQ+ students when we don't stand up for their rights. We hurt our BIPOC students when we try to erase the racism that exists. We hurt ALL our students by denying them stories that might give them a greater understanding of someone different from them. Books are meant to be windows and mirrors into reality, even when reality is uncomfortable.

I ask the board to continue to respect the process in policy 3210, listen to your students' voices, and support the decisions made at the school level by your trained professionals and committee. Thank you.

Good evening... My name is Kristel Behrend and I'm one of the librarians at Knightdale High School. I have a masters degree in Library Science, have been teaching for over 20 years, am a National Board certified teacher, and have been a finalist for teacher of the year in WCPSS.

I am also a mom, a mom of two WCPSS graduates, one of whom is gay. I am so thankful that she was in an area where her classmates, teachers, and community accepted her when she "came out" her junior year. I would expect no less for we are Wake County, one of the largest districts in North Carolina, and yet, when our Lt. Governor said, and I quote, "There's no reason anybody anywhere in America should be telling any child about transgenderism, homosexuality, any of that filth... And yes, I called it filth," my school system did not respond and affirm its students - you did not affirm my daughter.

No one stated that we think all of our WCPSS students are beautiful and clean, that they are not filth just because they identify as transgender, gay, or lesbian. Maybe we were afraid to speak too loudly, afraid of political fallout, or afraid that too many parents would complain about a school system that believes it's ok to be who you are. You censored yourselves as a district and as a board, but your silence has had a chilling effect.

We are facing unprecedented complaints and challenges and misinformation. People feel like it's acceptable to say things like "serpent spirit" in relation to our students, read the most salacious parts of a text completely out of context, and call for amazing librarians to be fired for doing their jobs. I am here as a mom, an educator, and a citizen - we have to be better for our students and our community.

You who are not part of the LGBTQ+ family are privileged to share your partners and your families with co-workers, staff, and students, in other words, you share your heterosexuality, openly and without thought. People who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, non-binary, or pansexual have to make the decision to be "seen" if they decide to share; they know that they are opening themselves to a world that will immediately judge them on that one thing. That's discrimination. We have laws that protect against that.

We also have spaces in our school system that protect against that, safe spaces that we call libraries. Spaces where you will find representation, you will see yourself in stories, you can learn empathy by reading stories of people who are different than you, but only if our school district has the spine to stand against the oppressors. You have been silent.

As Nobel Peace prize winner, Desmond Tutu, said, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." Librarians cannot fight this fight alone. Our LGBTQ+ students, staff, and families need to know that their district speaks for them, too.

“Nine out of 10 LGBTQ students regularly confront teasing, bullying and sometimes violence...” even in Wake County Schools.

“LGBTQ students are 140x more likely than heterosexual students to miss school due to safety concerns”... even in Wake County Schools.

“One out of 3 LGBTQ youth attempt suicide or have suicidal thoughts. Youth in schools with pro-LGBTQ policies report fewer thoughts of suicide.” Ask yourself if Wake County truly has pro-LGBTQ policies. On paper, policy 1710 states:

“The Wake County Board of Education acknowledges the dignity and worth of all students and employees and strives to create a safe, orderly, caring, and inviting school environment to facilitate student learning and achievement. The Board prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, transgender or gender identity, disability, or age and will provide equal access to designated youth groups as required by law. Any form of unlawful discrimination, harassment, or bullying in any educational or employment activities or programs is against Board policy.” Let me restate that first line, “We acknowledge the dignity and worth of all students and employees.” Dignity and worth. Those are just words if we don’t have actions to show our LGBTQ+ students, staff, and families that they have dignity and to help them feel worthy... actions like requiring staff to respect a student’s right to use other pronouns, setting clear bathroom and locker room policies that protect our LGBTQ+ youth, responding when our Lt. Governor calls them filth, keeping our libraries full of stories that let LGBTQ+ students know they are not alone, standing up to speakers who use hate speech in reference to transgender people, allowing LGBTQ+ staff to be as open as their heterosexual peers without repercussion, respecting our students’ privacy, and putting this in black and white for every principal in every Wake County Public School so they are not forced to make site-based decisions on how to interpret board policy 1710. I am proud to work at Knightdale High School where our LGBTQ+ students have quickly learned that we are a welcoming and open school. The rainbows are visible, representation in our books is plentiful, the library is a safe space for all students, we have a strong Gender Sexuality Alliance, and we welcome our students to use a private bathroom that they don’t have to ask permission to use. Without proper documentation, clearly stating how we should manage sensitive situations involving LGBTQ+ students, schools are reacting to individual situations rather than proactively seeking pro-LGBTQ+ procedures. If we want to uphold board policy, if we truly value ALL of our students, we have to speak out against the hatred proliferated by categorizing LGBTQ+ staff, students, and materials as filth and obscenity. If we don’t speak up, we are validating the loud voices seeking to oppress while alienating our most vulnerable population. (statistics from NCAC, <https://ncac.org/resource/defend-lgbtq-stories-a-resource>)

4/19/21

As part of School Library Month, we celebrated literacy week at Knightdale High School where we honored students’ literary freedoms. We had some special visitors. Allison Reid, Kendra Allen, and Susan Bock were kind enough to come out and read to our students. Yes, even high school students love a good read-aloud. We were sad to miss Ms. Scott but will definitely invite you next time round.

As part of FREEDOM week, our students learned about intellectual freedom and their 1st Amendment rights, commonly known as Freedom of Speech.

Through my research, I was reminded how important the courts are in defining our rights. In Tinker Vs. Des Moines, the courts determined that students also have 1st

amendment rights and they do not shed them at the schoolhouse door, allowing students to peacefully protest as long as it did not disrupt the school environment. Many of our students recently exercised this right when they walked out in protest of the anti-trans legislation that is sweeping the nation.

Lamont vs. PostMaster General determined that the right to receive information was actually protected by the 1st amendment as well, for we cannot intelligently speak about something if we are denied all perspectives. This was affirmed with Island Trees Vs. Pico, where it was applied to students who protested the removal of books from a school library just because the board disagreed with the content. Once again, our students' rights were protected.

The 14th amendment further protects students' rights in public schools, stating that the state cannot interfere with the constitutional rights of the public.

To get students thinking critically about their rights during literacy week, we had a bracket challenge in the spirit of March Madness. Five different classes had 5 different results because we all have strong opinions about our rights. One class chose Island Trees vs. Pico as the champion court case, even over the Snapchat case. One student said, "Just because everyone is not OK with a book doesn't mean you should take it away. If they don't like it, don't read it and then it will just sit on the shelf, not affecting anyone." Another stated, "You shouldn't take books out when they make you uncomfy, because they could help someone else."

The 1st Amendment also protects your right to speak out in favor of censorship, but if minors can be expected to respect the difference between hallway humor and public speech humor as determined in Bethel vs. Fraser, adults should too. I would imagine if I read "Tom Sawyer" in this venue, y'all would be mortified by the racist language that is a part of our history.

Censorship is a slippery slope. Texas is currently reviewing 850 books, many of which teach students about their rights. Florida is now pulling math textbooks. You need only look at every authoritarian regime in history to know that censorship is ugly.

Parents, you still have full authority of your child's 1st Amendment rights, but not other students' rights. Intellectual freedom is the basis for our democratic system. We expect our people to govern themselves. But to do so responsibly, our students and families must be well-informed (ALA). Librarians in Wake are proud to serve our public school students, all of them. We are a diverse public who should not be denied our constitutional rights.