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November 4, 2022

Central Bucks School District
Board of Education and Policy Committee
16 Welden Drive
Doylestown, PA 18901

Dear Center Bucks County School Board,

The undersigned leaders of professional educator preparation programs at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education (Penn GSE) provide this letter in response to concerns brought to our attention by parents in the Central Bucks School District regarding the [Board's proposed revision to Policy 321](#). We prepare teachers, school counselors, principals, and other educators to support children's learning in your school district and school districts across the United States. Penn GSE grounds educator preparation in research for real-world impact. We maintain an empathetic, caring, and respectful approach to our work while striving for educational justice for our university students and the students and communities they serve.

We urge the Board to reject the proposed revision to Policy 321 relating to "Political, Sociopolitical, and Other Related Communications." Rather than creating "... an atmosphere where all students ... are valued and supported," the proposed policy exacerbates health risks for vulnerable students while simultaneously reducing their access to an equitable education. Further, the policy conflates beliefs with facts, and implicitly threatens educators who would protect vulnerable children.

Education is a right, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

At Penn GSE we ensure that our novice principals, counselors, and teachers develop educational practices that support learning for all students. We teach our students to leverage the unique assets students bring to their own learning; we help them see and value the resources of the communities that surround their students. One of the first things our novice educators learn is how to build community and a sense of safety between themselves and students, and among students. A threat to physical, emotional, or psychological safety is a genuine barrier to a child's education. Research tells us that children who do not feel safe in their schools suffer myriad negative educational outcomes¹ ranging from increased absenteeism to lower cognition and reduced test

¹ When Youth Feel Unsafe: Brief Insights on the Cognitive and Academic Effects of Exposure to Violence; Center for Promise, America's Promise Alliance, February 2018.

scores. A recent national study reports that over 81% of LGBTQ+ students felt unsafe at school because of actual or perceived personal characteristics². 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.

The policy as proposed would instead raise barriers. Through the equal protection clause, the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution protects the right of all children to access a public K-12 education. This is a foundational principle of our American education system. Rather than protecting students, the proposed policy would, in fact, make schools *less safe* by curtailing communication to all students, faculty, and staff that a specific vulnerable population has a valued and recognized place in the educational community of Central Bucks County. Marginalized populations who may not feel safe to share information about their identities at home will no longer find privacy and security in the school setting, leaving little options for support. If educators are not allowed to provide tangible evidence that school is a safe place, such as posters and curriculum that feature minoritized communities, the space is rendered unsafe and thus harmful for countless current and future Central Bucks County students.

Gender identity and sexual orientation are not *belief* systems.

The proposed revision to Policy 321 conflates belief systems, like religion or political affiliation, with facts inherent to being human, such as one's gender identity or sexual orientation. One may choose a religion, but one may not choose their sexual orientation or gender³. Further, the proposed revised policy 321 would set beliefs (about religion, for example) in opposition to human characteristics (one's gender or sexual orientation). By limiting the protected items solely to beliefs, the policy would elevate and value beliefs above all else.

Educational leaders position their staff to value the education of all children.

It is reasonable for a school board to limit staff and faculty advocacy of personal beliefs. Such policies are aimed at protecting young learners from bias. However, it is antithetical to the purpose of a school board to limit advocacy on behalf of human characteristics.

The Central Bucks County School District **Mission** reads as follows.

The Central Bucks Schools will provide all students with the academic and problem solving skills essential for personal development, responsible citizenship, and life long learning.

In order to achieve these ultimate goals, Central Bucks County educators must create safe learning environments in which all students develop a sense of belonging so they

² Kosciw J., Clark C., Menard L.; The 2021 National School Climate Survey.

³ See definitions, policies, and policy guidance at the American Psychological Association and the American Medical Association at www.apa.org and www.ama-assn.org, respectively.

can thrive. As revised, Policy 321 implicitly threatens educators' capacity to create safe and welcoming learning environments for children. It privileges some students while perpetuating a system where other students, those who are most at risk, are denied equal representation. And thus, the revised policy works against its own interests by creating a work environment hostile to the fundamental work of educators.

Reject revisions to Policy 321.

As leaders of programs who prepare professional educators at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, we urge you to support children, to support your educators, to support your mission, and reject the proposed revisions to Policy 321.

Respectfully,

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