

## LOCAL EDUCATION

# Montgomery schools stopped using two LGBTQ-inclusive books amid legal battle

Montgomery County Public Schools pulled two storybooks with LGBTQ+ characters from classroom use amid an ongoing legal battle.

7 min



Parents protest in Rockville, Md., on June 27, 2023, urging the Montgomery County school system to allow families to opt out of books that feature LGBTQ+ characters. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)



By Nicole Asbury

October 23, 2024 at 4:40 p.m. EDT

Montgomery County Public Schools has stopped teaching two books featuring LGBTQ+ characters that are part of an ongoing legal battle over when families can opt children out of discussions about sexuality and gender identity.

Protests erupted in Maryland's largest school district last summer over its decision to prohibit families with elementary students from opting out of lessons using several storybooks with LGBTQ+ characters or themes. A group of parents sued the school system over the decision, saying it violates their First Amendment rights of religious freedom.

## MOST READ LOCAL &gt;



**1** Harris to deliver closing argument speech Tuesday on the National Mall

**2** D.C. police handcuffed her 9-year-old son. Now she's suing.



**3** GOP Rep. Kiggans's lead evaporates in Virginia's 2nd District, poll finds



**4** Fernando Valenzuela, pitching ace of 'Fernandomania' fervor, dies at 63



**5** &Pizza draws backlash for hinting at Marion Barry cocaine use in ads



The legal battle has placed the deep-blue D.C. suburb at the forefront of a larger conflict of how and when schools should have conversations about gender identity and sexuality.

#### Make the most of the DMV with our newsletter



(The Washington Post)

Make living in D.C. a little easier and more fun. Sign up for the Post Local newsletter to get local news, weather and expert advice — where to eat, where to drink and how to get around — every weekday.

The books removed, “Pride Puppy” and “My Rainbow,” were a part of a larger effort to represent LGBTQ+ families in the school system’s English Language Arts curriculum, and the district’s attorneys have defended the use of the books. But the decision to disapprove of the two texts from lessons — which was signed off in February — show school officials had some concerns about the content. Both books are still available in school libraries.

The Washington Post learned the books were pulled from classroom use after asking local school board candidates if they think parents should be able to opt out of storybooks that could introduce discussions about gender identity and sexuality. Rita Montoya, who is running for an at-large seat, mentioned in her response that the school system has a process for reviewing its books that resulted in “Pride Puppy” no longer being used in classrooms.



Follow D.C. region

+

The Post confirmed that was true by searching a database the district uses to track books. Another search found “My Rainbow” was also disapproved for classroom use.

Schools spokeswoman Liliana López also confirmed the books are not being used for instruction but the district did not provide a copy of its evaluation of the books. López said the two administrators who signed off on the decision were not available for an interview.

#### MOST READ



**1** Her billionaire marriage broke up. Her VP campaign fizzled. — Now she’s a Trump-world star.

**2** How a conspiracy-fueled group got a foothold in this hurricane-battered town



**3** Donald Trump fixates on Harris aide Ian Sams, who goads him on Fox News



**4** 19-year-old Walmart employee found dead inside walk-in oven



**5** Opinion | If Trump is really a fascist, then call me a fool



According to the district database, “My Rainbow” — a story about a mom who makes a colorful wig for her transgender daughter — was disapproved for classroom use because school officials wrote that it “could require teachers to explicitly teach vocabulary terms outside the context of the lesson.” “My Rainbow” was used for students in kindergarten through third grade to guide them on how to identify the theme of a story, and summarize the supporting details and ideas.

School officials cited similar concerns for “Pride Puppy,” an alphabet book that’s about a family who goes to a Pride parade and that was used for pre-kindergarteners up to fifth-graders, according to the district’s database. Educators used the book in the classroom to teach students how to understand a text.

López said school officials reevaluated the use of the books instructionally on their own accord, not due to a request from a parent. When asked if the vocabulary that concerned administrators had anything to do with gender identity and sexuality, she said she didn’t have details on the exact language.

Other books referenced in the opt-out legal battle — such as “Love, Violet,” a story about a young girl who is trying to make a valentine for her crush, who is another girl in the classroom — are still approved for instructional purposes, according to the database. Experts outside of the school system have said the books are developmentally appropriate.

Mark Eckstein, a LGBTQ advocate based in Montgomery County, said he thinks the school system has remained committed to representing diverse families, pointing to a new English Language Arts curriculum it recently adopted that he described as LGBTQ+ inclusive.

“To me, it is less about this book or that book, and more about giving kudos to MCPS’s Curriculum Department for their broad strategy to provide textbooks which are inclusive and diverse,” he said in an email.





Montgomery schools stopped using two LGBTQ-inclusive books amid legal battl...



Enrollment relatively flat in some D.C.-area school districts, data shows

The school system hasn't referenced its decision to stop using "My Rainbow" or "Pride Puppy" in filings related to the ongoing legal battle.

The storybooks were first used as teaching tools during the 2022-2023 school year, and some principals initially let parents pull their children out of the classroom when the books were read aloud. But in March 2023, the school system announced it'd prohibit any opt-outs. Attorneys representing the school system have said in court the requests were so high in volume that it caused disruptions to the school day.

In their lawsuit, a group of parents are asking courts for a preliminary injunction that would temporarily force the school system to offer opt outs while a lengthier legal battle is underway. That request has escalated to the Supreme Court, though it's unclear if justices will consider the case. Generally, the high court receives many requests for action but does not act on a lot of them.

On Tuesday, an attorney from the law firm representing the parents in the suit, said the school system's decision to stop using the two books because they teach vocabulary beyond the context of the lesson mirrors the heart of the parents' argument — that the books "are age inappropriate and go beyond just teaching inclusivity."

"Why should the school board be making that decision instead of parents? Parents saw this way before the school board did and asked for their kids to be opted out, and the school board is telling them they don't have the right to do that," said Eric Baxter, an attorney from Becket law. "This



just confirms how poorly reasoned and unjustified that decision is.”

Montgomery parents who have called for opt-outs have said they are not asking for the books to be removed from schools or from the curriculum. This year, the Maryland General Assembly tried to curtail any challenges to books by passing a law called the Freedom to Read Act that prohibits libraries from removing material from its catalogue “because of partisan, ideological or religious disapproval.”

## **What the school board hopefuls think of an opt-out**

This month, The Post asked Montgomery school board candidates for their views on whether the district should allow opt-outs in a questionnaire about their campaigns.

Only one candidate Brenda Diaz, who is running for District 2, said parents should be able to opt their children out of the readings. She pointed to the school system’s guidelines on religious diversity, which allows students to be “excused from specific classroom discussions or activities that they believe would impose a substantial burden on their religious beliefs.”

“While it’s important for students to see their identities reflected in literature, the inclusion of LGBTQ+ literature in classrooms shows MCPS’s struggle to communicate respect for all community members regarding cultural and religious beliefs,” Diaz wrote. “Parents can opt their children out of specific portions of sex education for religious reasons. Schools should be centers of learning, not political controversy.”

The five other candidates are Natalie Zimmerman, who is Diaz’s opponent in District 2; Shebra Evans and Laura Stewart, who are running for District 4; and Montoya and Lynne Harris, who are running for an at-large seat. All said they view the books as vital ways of teaching students about

diverse families, and they would not support an opt-out policy.

“It is not the job of MCPS or an educator to parent, but instead to prepare students for the world and to be good citizens,” Zimmerman wrote. “Opting out of curriculum is a slippery slope — especially as we see pushback on teaching things like the full scope of American history and eliminating diverse books from school and public libraries.”

## Montgomery County school board candidates' views on book opt-outs

The Post asked candidates if parents should be able to opt out of storybooks that could introduce discussions about gender identity and sexuality. Read their responses.

NAME	DO THEY SUPPORT AN OPT-OUT?	STATEMENT
Lynne Harris, at-large	No	<p>The goal of public education is to support young people in becoming critical thinking problem solvers who appreciate the value of everyone. That requires classrooms infused with windows and mirrors — where students see themselves - their culture, family, ethnicity - reflected in the curriculum they're taught and the books they read, and also learn to appreciate those who are different. That inclusive, affirming approach is also central to the work to become an anti-racist, anti-bias school system.</p>
Rita Montoya, at-large	No	<p>Students deserve to see themselves and their families in the books they read. Montgomery County Public Schools must also follow the law. In 2024, the State of Maryland passed the Freedom to Read Act (HB 785) which prohibits books and materials being removed from circulation "because of partisan, ideological, or religious disapproval." Further, MCPS Regulation IIB-RA provides a process for parents, students and staff to "request a reconsideration of previously approved instructional materials being used in MCPS." This process proposes the book for review by MCPS staff to decide whether it stays in circulation or is removed. The process is implemented and even resulted in the removal of "Pride Puppy" from MCPS circulation (See MCPS Database of Accountable Evaluations: disapproved on 2/23/2024 seemingly because it "requires more explicit instruction of vocabulary and concepts beyond the curriculum standard").</p> <p>Montgomery County is the most religiously diverse county in the U.S. While it's important for students to see their identities reflected in literature, the inclusion of LGBTQ+ literature in classrooms shows MCPS's</p>



Brenda Diaz, district 2	Yes	<p>struggle to communicate respect for all community members regarding cultural and religious beliefs. MCPS must adhere to its "Guidelines for Respecting Religious Diversity," focusing on promoting appreciation for our diverse student population's beliefs. Therefore, MCPS should provide an "opt-out" option for storybooks discussing gender and sexuality. I support principals who objected to age-inappropriate LGBTQ+ content. The Montgomery County Association of Administrators and Principals (MCAAP) highlighted concerns about anti-religious bias and the need for parental engagement regarding LGBTQ+ literature. Freedom of religion is protected by the First Amendment and Maryland's Constitution. Parents can opt their children out of specific portions of sex education for religious reasons. Schools should be centers of learning, not political controversy. Teachers and administrators must remain neutral in these debates, allowing parents to guide their children's upbringing.</p>
-------------------------	-----	--

Natalie Zimmerman, district 2	No	<p>In Maryland, current law applies to opting out the human health and sexuality portion of curriculum. Families are able to choose to opt-out of this if they wish to do so. MCPS's job is to prepare students for their future in all capacities as they mature and this includes preparing our students to interact with diverse people. We are a public school system, which means we welcome all students and all families. We intend to prepare our students for a public life. It is not the job of MCPS or an educator to parent, but instead to prepare students for the world and to be good citizens. Opting out of curriculum is a slippery slope - especially as we see pushback on teaching things like the full scope of American history and eliminating diverse books from school and public libraries. For these reasons, I do not support an opt out of storybooks that feature diverse families.</p>
-------------------------------	----	--

I don't support banning books or opting out of education. I believe it's important to teach tolerance, kindness and civility in schools through the curriculum. Our world is so diverse and we live in

Shebra Evans, district 4

No

one of the most diverse counties in the country. When students engage in learning that includes different perspectives, they gain opportunities to think critically about their own beliefs and better navigate the multicultural society that we live in. The school system should always strive to improve communication to and with our families, particularly around teaching and learning.

Laura Stewart, district 4

No

I do not support expanding opt out beyond what is required by state law. It is important that all children see their diverse communities represented in the curriculum, including gender, sexual orientation, religious, and racial diversity. Exposure to diverse inclusive curricula is an important step to remove stigmas that can lead to bullying and self harm. I started a petition supporting the current MCPS opt out policy, which has over 3000 signatures, and helped found a new coalition to support inclusive schools. Allowing opt outs would lead to children leaving the classroom during science, language arts, and social studies, creating a chaotic classroom environment. A public school must serve the diverse public interest.

Share

Comments



By [Nicole Asbury](#)

Nicole Asbury is a local reporter for The Washington Post covering education and K-12 schools in Maryland. [X](#) @NicoleAsbury

Sign up



Subscribe to comment and get the full experience. Choose your plan →

# The Washington Post

## Company

About The Post  
Newsroom Policies &  
Standards  
Diversity & Inclusion  
Careers  
Media & Community Relations  
WP Creative Group  
Accessibility Statement

## Sections

Trending  
Politics  
Elections  
Opinions  
National  
World  
Style  
Sports  
Business  
Climate  
Well+Being  
D.C., Md., & Va.  
Obituaries  
Weather  
Arts & Entertainment  
Recipes

## Get The Post

Become a Subscriber  
Gift Subscriptions  
Mobile & Apps  
Newsletters & Alerts  
Washington Post Live  
Reprints & Permissions  
Post Store  
Books & E-Books  
Print Special Editions Store  
Today's Paper  
Public Notices

## Contact Us

Contact the Newsroom  
Contact Customer Care  
Contact the Opinions Team  
Advertise  
Licensing & Syndication  
Request a Correction  
Send a News Tip  
Report a Vulnerability

## Terms of Use

Digital Products Terms of Sale  
Print Products Terms of Sale  
Terms of Service  
Privacy Policy  
Cookie Settings  
Submissions & Discussion  
Policy  
RSS Terms of Service  
Sitemap  
Ad Choices