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COMMITTEE ON RULES

STEERING AND POLICY

June 2, 2015

Kathy DeMatteo  
President  
Twin Peaks Charter Academy Board of Directors  
340 South Sunset Street  
Longmont CO 80501

Dear Ms. DeMatteo:

I write to you regarding the recent graduation ceremonies at Twin Peaks Charter Academy. It was reported in the Daily Camera and national news sources that a student at Twin Peaks, where you serve as Board Chair, was not allowed to give his valedictorian speech at graduation and denied public recognition of his academic honors solely on the basis of his sexual orientation, which was contextually indicated in his proposed speech.

As I'm sure your board is aware, St. Vrain Valley School District has an equal education opportunities policy that reads as follows:

“Every student of this school district shall have equal educational opportunities through programs offered in the school district regardless of race, color, ancestry, creed, sex, sexual orientation, religion, national origin, marital status, disability or need for special education services. This concept of equal educational opportunity shall guide the Board and staff in making decisions related to school district facilities, selection of educational materials, equipment, curriculum and regulations affecting students.”

It is my understanding that Twin Peaks has neither sought nor received a waiver from this policy. It is also my understanding that this area of district policy is not waivable for charter schools under state law, even if the mutual desire to do so were to exist. The Charter Schools Act (C.R.S. 22-30.5-104) states all charter schools are subject to all state laws prohibiting discrimination, and the Colorado Anti-Discrimination Act (C.R.S. 24-34-601) makes clear that singling out a particular sexual orientation for discrimination within an educational institution is a violation of state law. As such, the recent actions regarding removing the speaking role and customary academic acknowledgement of Evan Young based on his sexual orientation risks placing Twin Peaks out of compliance with its charter and could be grounds for the termination of your charter.

Pursuant to school and district policy, Mr. Young submitted his prepared comments for approval. If the contents of the speech contained any demeaning language, such as curse words or racial or ethnic slurs, that would be cause for significant editing and recommendations for changes to the speech. But the mere mention of the student's sexual orientation is no more consequential in the context of a speech about “secrets” than the various other examples that the speech contained.

No doubt speakers in prior years have mentioned their heterosexuality in the form of references to their girlfriends or boyfriends or dating, and were not singled out for removal.

I had the opportunity to hear Mr. Young's speech this past Sunday, and there is nothing in it that can reasonably be construed as offensive. In fact, the act of preventing him from giving it merely on the basis of his sexual orientation, mentioned in the speech, is the unfortunate and offensive act that was perpetrated in the name of your school.

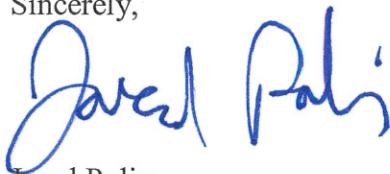
I suggest that Twin Peaks immediately launch an internal investigation, which will hopefully show that the action of removing a graduation speaker at an official event on the basis of his sexual orientation was not in fact school policy, and that the proper disciplinary steps have been taken regarding the people involved, as well as steps to ensure that district policies that the charter school is subject to are followed in the future.

I also want to bring up the issue of outing a student to his parents. This action by the principal was not only a serious violation of Evan's privacy – particularly since he had already reached 18 years of age at the time – but it also placed him in a potentially dangerous situation. In many cases, parents might react negatively to such news, and it is a leading driver of youth homelessness. Therefore, letting young people decide when and where and if the timing is right for informing their parents of their sexual orientation is of paramount importance. Fortunately in this case, the parents were accepting, but that does not forgive Principal Buchmann's unthinkable reckless act of outing an 18-year-old to his parents without the student's permission.

In the environment of a school, it is important that students can have a trusting relationship with their counselors and administration. I fear that your actions will jeopardize the trust that LGBT students have in school resources going forward unless action is taken.

I strongly encourage your school to launch an internal investigation into this matter and work with groups such as Out Boulder and One Colorado or another organization they recommend to implement systemic reforms to ensure that the school provides a safe learning environment for all students, including LGBT students. I look forward to seeing the results of that investigation and the reparative actions that will be taken to ensure that no student at Twin Peaks is discriminated against based on his or her sexual orientation or gender identity again.

Sincerely,



Jared Polis

Member of Congress

cc: Don Haddad, Pete Wanninger, Shelley Coleman, Andrew Howell, Marisa Shrider, Jim Schauer, Joie Siegrist, Debbie Lammers, Bob Smith, John Ahrens, John Creighton, Paula Pears, Mike Schiers