

‘Politically charged’? School district bans LGBTQ pride, Black Lives Matter flags.

The rule divides the community, with some supporting the decision and others saying it hurts marginalized kids.

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A Utah school district has landed in the middle of the classroom culture war after explicitly banning the flags of LGBTQ pride and Black Lives Matter from being displayed in any of its buildings.



The spokesman for Davis School District in northern Utah says that administrators there believe the symbols have become too “politically charged.” And they want schools to remain “neutral” on all issues.

“So no flags fly in our schools except for the flag of the United States of America,” said spokesman Chris Williams.

The rule has emboldened conservative crusaders who, like Utah Board of Education member Natalie Cline, have suggested that classrooms are “no place for identity politics.” They see the decision as a win.

But it has touched off backlash from community activists, who say that flying the Pride and BLM flags tells students from marginalized backgrounds that they are welcome. They argue that it’s about fostering belonging and community — not displaying any political views.

And they’re worried that Black and Latino students or LGBTQ students will no longer feel like there are safe places they can easily spot in a school when they are the minority in the state. “These people who want to remove the flag, they don’t understand what it means to us,” said Amanda Darrow, the director of youth, family and education at the Utah Pride Center. “That flag represents love and acceptance.”

The rule in Davis School District, Williams said, has been in place for a few years. But it drew attention this month when it was sent out in an email reminder to teachers and administrators. Screenshots swirled around on social media. One from North Layton Junior High said the rule on flags also extended to any other decorations, including stickers that a teacher might wear. No rainbow pins or pins listing pronouns, for instance, are allowed. It added: “It does not matter what we have done in the past.”

Williams said the district is just following state law.

Utah law doesn’t specifically say anything about flags in the classroom. But it does instruct teachers to never mention their political or religious views. The ACLU of Utah also has said that an educator’s right to freedom of speech is limited in the classroom.

But interpreting those instructions and statutes has played out differently in different districts, when it comes to what’s allowed to be pinned on the walls next to the ABCs or the periodic table. Some, like Davis, have taken a hard-line approach, casting a broad net over what they see as “political.”

Meanwhile, other districts let almost anything fly.

The difference in Salt Lake City

In Salt Lake City School District, Principal Nicole Palmer has probably 40 flags flying in the atrium of Rose Park Elementary where students first walk in each morning on their way to class.

She started with flags representing every country and nationality of the kids there; the population of the school on the west side of the state capital is 71% students of color. She thinks it would be even more important in most Utah schools where white students are the majority. There’s also a few Indigenous tribal flags that Palmer is working to get more of.

And at the very front are the rainbow stripes of the progress pride flag and the black polyester fabric of the Black Lives Matter flag.

“You find yourself represented in one or more of the flags,” Palmer said. “It’s intended to be comforting and reassuring and validating. I want students to see that they are wanted here and seen here for who they are — every part of who they are.”

It’s personal for Palmer. But it also hasn’t gone without some pushback, which boiled over last fall.

Palmer has had a standard rainbow pride flag flying at the elementary for a few years, ever since the principal met a transgender student at the school who was transitioning. She wanted the student to know that they were welcome and recognized; she also designated a gender-neutral bathroom.

“The whole intent of hanging the flags is to communicate through symbols,” Palmer said. “You can’t just hang a flag, though. You have to be a welcoming school through actions, too.”

In November, the principal upgraded the flag to the progress pride flag, which is more representative of all identities in the LGBTQ community, including individuals of color.

At the same time, Palmer added the Black Lives Matter flag, feeling prompted to do so after a sixth grade student asked her about it in response to the nationwide protests against the mistreatment of individuals of color, including often at the hands of police.

Once they were up, she took a video and posted it to Instagram, tagging Rose Park Elementary. Palmer wrote: “Welcome to our new flags.”

The next morning, she was confronted with hundreds of angry calls and threatening emails.

Eric Moutsos, a prominent conservative activist in Utah, had shared the video on Facebook, calling on his followers to demand the school remove the flags, especially the Black Lives Matter one. In his own conversation with the principal, Palmer said, he told her that it was illegal to fly the flags in a school.

“It caught me completely off guard,” Palmer said.

She called the district to see if she had done something wrong. She had never hidden the flags. In fact, she had taken the superintendent on a tour around the school.

The superintendent called her back directly and said she had his support. Palmer let go of a breath she felt she’d been holding in her chest.

Then-superintendent Larry Madden also followed up with an email to the district community, saying he was proud of the flags and hoped Palmer wouldn’t take them down. He said the 3-foot-by-5-foot pieces of colorful cloth are “not a political statement.”

“The decision to hang these flags is backed by policies in our district that bolster ALL students and specifically prohibit discrimination,” Madden wrote. “The flags show our students and families we love them and want them to succeed. That’s a goal I hope the entire community can support.”

The new superintendent of the district, Timothy Gadson, told The Salt Lake Tribune that stance still stands under his administration, too.

Soon after, Palmer noticed that others were chiming into the comments on the Instagram post and sending her kind emails to counteract those protesting the flags. Some said they wished they had those flags up when they went to school. Others found the ones representing their counties and wrote things like, “Go Kenya!” Many in the LGBTQ community, specifically,

thanked the principal; some said they believed the flags would save student lives.

Since then, more LGBTQ and Black Lives Matter flags have been popping up across the district. One administrator received a grant to buy more and distributed them to every school.

Up to districts to decide

With Davis and Salt Lake City school districts at opposite ends of the issue, where does that leave other schools in the state? Which example can they or should they follow?

Mark Peterson, the spokesman for the Utah Board of Education, said it is up to each district or charter to set their own policy on flags.

There is no rule from the state board on flags outside of the American flag, which all schools are required to have. Schools are also instructed to have students recite the Pledge of Allegiance each morning (which parents can also choose to opt out of). But that's it, Peterson said.

The Utah Legislature has not weighed in on the issue, so unless there's more clear direction there, districts have only to follow the fuzzy area of state law that prohibits educators from sharing their personal beliefs on religion or politics.

With that, it comes down to what school districts individually decide is too "political." At Canyons School District, for instance, they're trying to cut down the middle.

Teachers can only hang flags on their walls if it's directly related to curriculum, said spokesman Jeff Haney, such as a Soviet-era flag in a history class. But teachers can decorate their personal desk however they see fit — including putting a pride flag or Black Lives Matter flag there.

"If they want to put a statue of Buddha on their desk or a mug with rainbow there, then they can," Haney said.

He added that he believes districts are "operating in an era where there's enhanced scrutiny of schools," with culture wars erupting over lessons about race and more students and parents filming things in the classroom. That has caused the district to try to be more cautious with its rules. Canyons, Haney said, wants to be neutral in both appearance and action.

His comments come after a Utah teacher left her job at Lehi High School this year after she was recorded sounding off to her students in a profane address that jumped from former President Donald Trump to the COVID-19 vaccine, climate change and the LGBTQ community. The prohibition on speech like that, though, is more clear-cut in state law than flying a flag.

A video of the teacher's talk was posted online by Moutsos, the same conservative leader who called the principal at Rose Park Elementary over the flags there.

And last year in Utah, one school came under fire for not doing enough to support the LGBTQ community after one student cut down a pride flag to cheers, while another school drew criticism for a teacher proudly wearing a Black Lives Matter T-shirt.

It's left many districts feeling afraid, Haney said, and like they're stuck no matter what they do, open to the crossfire from both sides of the issue.

The Davis School District spokesman said the hope is that by having no flags, they'll avoid division and no child will feel alienated.

"This direction is surely not something that slights anyone," he said. "We have to be welcoming to every student that walks in the class. We cannot set up a situation where students walk in feel attacked or uncomfortable."

He added that all schools in the district have a gay-straight alliance club; and students are still free to express themselves, wearing pride or BLM shirts if they want. And the police Thin Blue Line flag is also banned from being flown, he noted, suggesting there's no favoritism shown.

The Fraternal Order of Police union in Utah said it supports the decision. It put out a letter last year criticizing the teacher over the shirt for Black Lives Matter, suggesting that has become a political organization. "Schools should be a neutral learning place," union President Brent Jex said.

Black Lives Matter, though, has said its group is not political, saying members want justice and fair treatment for people of color.

A safe place

Some groups, including the Black Lives Matter chapter in Utah, have said they feel the American flag has become a political symbol. So where is the line drawn? And who gets to draw it?

Can kindergarten classrooms not have rainbows on their walls now?

Darrow, with the Utah Pride Center, believes that as it stands, school administrators have too much power to choose what is or isn't considered political. And those decisions to not make some students feel uncomfortable, she said, prioritize those who don't come from marginalized backgrounds.

She said when she was in high school in Utah in the early 2000s, she had not yet come out as LGBTQ. She didn't feel safe.

Darrow remembers, though, a few teachers having a pride flag in their classroom then and instantly feeling like it signaled she was in a safe space. "I was so afraid to be bullied for who I was," she said. "But when I saw those flags, I would just smile."

“

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NICOLE PALMER

Rose Park Elementary School principal