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As Lafayette School District works to amplify inclusion efforts, outside community members stage weekly protests

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Protesters across from Lafayette Elementary May 5. Photo Sharon K. Sobotta

When Lafayette Elementary School joined schools and entities across the country with displaying a flag in honor of Transgender Day of Visibility on March 31 after a resolution was unanimously passed for the Lafayette School District, many people celebrated the victory in making schools more inclusive. A small group of people have been demonstrating across the street from the school on Friday afternoons ever since.

In a letter to parents Lafayette School District Superintendent Brent Stephens called the acknowledgment of Transgender Day of Visibility an important marker to recognize and celebrate the presence, accomplishments and contributions of transgender people to the community and informed them about the display of the Transgender Pride Flag (in March).

"For many, (this acknowledgement) also represents the diversity and vibrancy of the larger LGBTQ+ Community. Last week, the Lafayette School District Governing Board unanimously passed this resolution to affirm our school district's support for transgender students and families. It is another in a long line of policy decisions in our District meant to protect all our students, families, and staff; and uphold the legal obligations of the District to provide a safe learning environment that is free from all

forms of bias.

"The unanimously passed resolution," he said, "was both a celebration of the presence of transgender people among our students and families, and, sadly, a sobering reminder of the intensifying political and legal challenges faced by trans people everywhere."

Lisa Disbrow, a 2022 candidate for Contra Costa County Board of Education, and a few others began showing up across the street most Friday afternoons to greet students, parents and passers-by with signs emblazoned with slogans like "biology is not bigotry," "DEI-Deliberate Extinction of Innocence" and messages about what should be kept out of the library.

"(Biology is not bigotry) means there are two sexes - male and female. And to say that isn't to be a bigoted statement, it's a scientific statement," Disbrow said, while explaining her signs. "This sign says 'sexual exposure is abusive.' That's based on a drag queen event that Burton Valley sponsored and the Lafayette School District endorsed."

It's unclear if the event Disbrow was referring to was the one sponsored by the Lafayette Learning Center in which a drag queen named Bella read stories to children and sang songs to them and their parents as a group of protesters and another group of supporters held signs outside of the event.

When asked about the specifics of her concern with the school district's sentiment that all students regardless of gender identity should be accepted or that using someone's preferred pronouns might be a small way to make someone else feel seen, Disbrow described an unnecessary imposition. "Why should you change? Why should a group be able to control the English language because of their feelings? In America, you can be anything you want, right? As an adult, what I'm concerned about is indoctrinating children into ideas that are not proven," Disbrow said.

Disbrow also expressed concerns that by recognizing nonbinary and trans-identifying folks, it somehow detracts from those identifying in the traditional binary. "How do children who are raised to believe in just the male and the female sex feel recognized? Where are they included? Because they're not."

Gina Schwartz, a passerby, who stopped to engage with Disbrow on May 5 after noticing her signs, couldn't disagree more with that statement. "Our media is saturated with that. We are surrounded by examples of boys and girls being boys and girls, and men and women being men and women. It wasn't until recently

that same sex couples were able to legally marry," Schwartz said. "And interracial marriage in the United States has (only been fully legal since 1967). Little by little, gains are being made. But it's not enough. We need more. Everybody deserves to see themselves, to be seen and to be heard, acknowledged, honored and loved.

"This kind of rhetoric continues to contribute to disparaging mental health situations where, not only children, but also adults are in crisis and it contributes to suicide rates," Schwartz added. "It's (based on) such a lack of understanding. People can live their own lives and deserve to."

Schwartz said she wants all kids to know that they are loved. "I want (queer and trans people) to know that there are adults that support them. It's a sad truth, that they're going to encounter people that don't," Schwartz said. "But there are people who love them and care for them and want to support them."

Sev is a college student who uses he/they pronouns and identifies as black, queer and religious. For Sev, being a part of communities with LGBTQ+ affirming messaging is heartening and tells him that there is a place for them. "Growing up, we were taught that we should love everyone," Sev said. "I've never thought that you couldn't be queer and be a Christian. When I hear people say that if you're queer or trans, God will hate you; it's heartbreaking, because that's not supposed to be."

Sev said more can be accomplished when we set aside judgment and show up as our authentic selves. "As long as we're able to be honest with ourselves and also honest with the different components of the things that make up who we are, then that's where we're able to have deeper conversations."

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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