

# WHY ARE A BUNCH OF HIGH SCHOOLERS FIGHTING TO HAVE THEIR VOICES HEARD AND DEMANDING THEIR IDENTITIES BE RECOGNIZED IN THEIR SCHOOLS?

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*Midas Jenkins, Dandelion Johnstone, Hailey Batrick and Ellie Dobias (left to right) at Newberg High School. The students have campaigned to end a ban on political signage at their schools.*



Midas Jenkins walked through the parking lot at Pulp and Circumstance, a Newberg, Oregon, gift boutique, one day last winter when he saw a bumper sticker on a car. He did a double take in disbelief; he immediately recognized the black-and-white sticker he had made that featured a phrase he'd coined several weeks earlier: "I'm not political, I'm human." This was the first time he'd seen his creation in public.

Jenkins, a high school senior, first voiced the phrase during a school board meeting in September. The phrase came out of frustration over what had been going on with the schools in his town. Since the



*Midas Jenkins holds a sign used during student demonstrations against the ban of political symbols made by the Newberg school board.*

beginning of the school year, Newberg school board members had been advocating for the removal of political or quasi-political signs — such as pride flags and Black Lives Matter signs — from its classrooms.

Because of the board's actions, Jenkins, a transgender student, said that "his identity was being threatened." Through much of the fall semester, Jenkins and other students had led protests in hopes they could reverse the board's position. Seeing the sticker thrilled Jenkins. "People are buying those stickers for a reason," Jenkins said, "and it shows they care about the same things as me."

Jenkins is a student at Catalyst High School, a charter school affiliated with Newberg's main public high school. In his early years at Catalyst, when he was still struggling with gender conformities, Jenkins said the teachers supported him and made him comfortable within the school community. Now, because of the board's actions, he was scared that such support would be lost, and he wasn't the only one.

"The terrible things going on in my little town," said Jenkins, "is something that affects people outside of [Newberg]."

Over the past year, students in Newberg have campaigned — through protests, petitions and walk-outs — to overturn the ban on political signage. Their



*Newberg High School student Ellie Dobias promotes LGBTQ symbols in her daily attire, down to her socks.*

pushback mirrors similar actions by young people in other parts of the United States, such as Florida where students are among the most vocal opponents of the "Don't Say Gay" bill. While Florida and Newberg may be on different sides of the country, the students are fighting to be heard about issues they contend are instrumental to their growth. Hailey Battrick, a junior at Newberg High School and a member of the LGBTQ+ community, said the board's decision to eliminate signs in classrooms goes counter to growth: "Who in their right mind thinks, 'I want to create a better educational community, so I'm going to cut out this entire chunk of students and alienate them?'"

A little over 20 miles southwest of Portland a "Welcome to Newberg: A Great Place to Grow" sign greets visitors to town. Farms and wineries give the drive into Newberg a rural feel, with a mix of mom-and-pop shops and the occasional chain store. Besides its small-town feel, Newberg,

with a population of roughly 23,000 — around 4% of Portland's — varies in other ways from the big city. While Portland leans decidedly to the left, 52 percent of Newberg voters voted Republican in the 2020 election.

Prior to that election, in the summer of 2020, COVID-19 was still at its height and the Black Lives Matter movement was sweeping the nation. In Newberg, the seven-member school board approved an anti-racist resolution condemning white supremacy, bigotry, racism and hate speech in schools. All but one board member, Dave Brown, voted yes on the resolution. In a written statement after the vote, Brown, the board's chairman, said that "the 'anti-racism' movement reduces all issues to race and will lead to polarization, not progress."

When students started to return to the classrooms in March 2021, after being online for nearly a year, they found some teachers had put BLM and pride flags up in classrooms to show their support for students from these marginalized groups.

Elaine Koskela, the success coach at Catalyst, said that even before the anti-racist resolution, classrooms in her high school had little rainbow paw print stickers that said “You Are Welcome Here” or “Safe Zone.” She said the displays were a way to show students that teachers were “standing in solidarity with these students.”

But by April, some parents and other community members started to complain about the signs, such as one in Dundee Elementary School classroom that read: “Black Students, Black Dreams, Black Futures, Black Lives Matter.”

One parent who had reservations about the signs was Jacob Hamilton. A father of two Newberg students, Hamilton said he does not oppose politically oriented signs, but there should be context behind their placement. “If Black Lives Matter [signs are] in the schools, in a learning situation, it should be in a social studies or history class, so you can explain the context,” Hamilton said. “I don’t want just a random flag or anything like that presented individually in the classroom without context.”

That summer, prior to the new school year, the board proposed a new policy that would “remove all Black Lives Matter (aka BLM) signs, flags, and placards, apparel, buttons, and all other modes of dis-

play, and all instances of the symbol known as the Pride Flag from District facilities immediately.”

While the policy would not come up for a full board vote until September, it quickly sparked responses from a range of people.

District lawyers said that banning just pride and BLM flags would be unconstitutional. The proposed policy was changed to: “Any posters, signs, flags, banners, pictures or other digital or physical image that depicts support or opposition relating to a political, quasi-political, or controversial topic.”

As for students, text messages denouncing the policy flooded many of their phones. Dandelion Johnstone, a junior at Newberg High School, remembers their phone

started to “blow up” with messages about the policy. “I looked at my phone and I see this: ‘Hey, they are trying to get rid of these flags and Black Lives Matter signs,’” Johnstone said. “I was just like, What? That’s ridiculous. There is no way this could be real.”

Midas Jenkins was among those getting the texts. He knew he needed to do more than just read them.

Jenkins doesn’t have the typical educational background. After he attended first grade for two weeks, Jenkins’ family pulled him out of school. It would be another 10 years before he was back in a formal school setting; in 2018 he enrolled at Catalyst. Now, at age 21, he is getting ready to graduate.

Jenkins said he generally avoids public speaking, but he said he knew he needed to tell the board about why this policy was wrong. He emailed the board telling members that he wanted to speak during the public comment session on September 22, a week before the vote.

The public comment session took place over Zoom, attended by seven board members, the school superintendent and Newberg community members. With notes from his teachers and encouragement from peers, Jenkins Zoomed in from a friend’s house and got ready to make his speech. As the time came for him to speak,

he left his friends and walked into a room alone. It was one of the “scariest moments of my life,” he recalled.

In a two-minute speech he told the board why this policy was harmful to him and others like him. “When the new school board quickly decided to ban all BLM and LGBTQ symbols, I felt like you were telling me that there is no room for people like me,” Jenkins said, reading from his script. “That my life, because of my identity, is not valued.” But then, just as he was about to finish his prepared remarks, he went off-script and told the board, “I’m not political, I’m human.”

Though Jenkins said he was proud of himself for speaking up, he also felt like the majority of the board wasn’t listening to him. Jenkins said that what he and others realized

**WHO IN THEIR RIGHT MIND THINKS ‘I WANT TO CREATE A BETTER EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY SO I’M GOING TO CUT OUT THIS ENTIRE CHUNK OF STUDENTS AND ALIENATE THEM.’**



**LEFT:** Catalyst High School senior Carter Stolp shows off the sticker on his guitar case that reads: “Celebrate Diversity, Embrace Differences.” Stolp ran a voter drive to register students to vote in the recall election of two Newberg school board members.

**BELOW:** Catalyst success coach Elaine Koskela displays various pins and buttons showing support for marginalized communities on campus.



Newberg students Hailey Battrick and Ellie Dobias sit atop the Newberg High School sign.



was that these public comments “had a strong sense that it was for show” and that the board “never really responded or commented on anything.”

Once Jenkins finished his remarks, he walked out of the room and was greeted with open arms from his peers. Their joy was short-lived. The following week, on September 28, in a 4-3 vote, the board passed the policy.

Jenkins, who considers himself an “optimistic” person, said, “It’s not easy to make me angry.”

Dave Brown, 64, has been a resident of Newberg for 58 years. Since 2019, Brown has been a member of Newberg’s school board and became the board chair in 2021. “I worked at the high

school for 20 years, and my wife is in her 33rd year,” said Brown. “So, we have been around education for a long time.”

Brown, one of the four members who voted for the banning of signs in classrooms, has his reasons for opposing the signs. “Public schools were meant to be neutral,” said Brown. “By putting up these signs teachers are violating that.”

He said that allowing BLM and pride flags in classrooms means other signs, like a National Rifle Association (NRA) or Christian flag, would have to be allowed.

Brown said he wants to “help the students in any way we can,” and that the signs in the classroom and the debate around them are distracting students’ learning. When Brown first joined the school board, he said most of the topics of debate

were school-or education-orientated, like “lunch menus or start times.” Now, he contends, much of the debate is about “society things.” He wonders if the board will go back to discussing topics like “how do we make the English department better?” He adds, “We have to represent every kind of student in our school. That’s what kids need.”

Brown and the other three board member’s have support from some parents and community members. “I don’t believe one point of view should be taught in the schools,” said Jacob Hamilton. “I send my kids to school to learn the ABCs and 123s.”

On a sunny Friday in March, Hailey Battrick and Ellie Dobias sit on top of the Newberg High School entrance sign. They got out of school just minutes earlier. The two talk about their plans for the weekend and the high school’s upcoming play. While they know what their weekend plans are, they are unsure of the future, especially after everything that happened this past year.

Following the board vote in September, unrest continued in Newberg. In November, the board fired Dr. Joe Morelock, the school superintendent, without cause. (In May 2022 the Newberg school board hired Stephen Phillips as the new superintendent.) In December, Dandelion Johnstone helped orchestrate a school walkout during which Catalyst and Newberg students met on the Newberg High School football field to show their support for marginalized groups.

In the following weeks, some parents, teachers and students organized an election to recall two board members, including Dave Brown. Catalyst senior Carter Stolp ran a voter registration drive to inform and register students to vote in local elections, including the recall one. Even with all the students’ efforts, the recall didn’t go through. Battrick, 16, was shocked by the loss. “I still don’t quite understand how we lost the recall,” Battrick said. “I’m also really angry that I couldn’t vote in it, but that’s not something I can control.”

The students in Newberg have realized there are limits to what they can control. They can manage their classes and try to keep their grades up, but over the past two years they have faced a flurry of unexpected challenges. Dobias isn’t sure what will happen next. “The ban on the flags, Dr. Joe being fired and the recall, all of that is more distracting to our learning than seeing a rainbow flag in the hallway,” said Dobias.

Even with the events of the past two years, Midas Jenkins has stayed on top of his schooling and is ready to graduate in June. While Jenkins isn’t sure what his future entails, he is sure of one thing: He plans to stay in Newberg to keep fighting the sign ban. He wants to give future generations what he was given: an identity. As he said, “I don’t want all the things that really saved me to be taken away.”