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NEWS STATEMENT

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LGBTQIA+ INCLUSION AND EQUITY CONCERNS IN WCBOE SCHOOLS AND AFFILIATED ACTIVITIES

On Saturday February 8th 2020, it was reported to PFLAG Salisbury Inc. by several people in attendance at the James M. Bennett production of Rock and Roll Revival that the production contained a scene that many in the LGBTQ+ community, in particular the transgender community, would find offensive. The referenced scene contained a male actor, who is not a current student at JMB, portraying a female character in a dress, which was exclusively purposed for comedic effect. Additional reports from some students involved in the production revealed larger issues backstage, to include allegations of the use of homophobic slurs, bullying, and a “man-circle” pep rally in the boy’s locker room which was uncomfortable for many students involved. The overall climate surrounding the production was reported to us as one which exclusively emphasized and enforced heterosexuality and hyper-masculinity, which concerned some students and parents. Students and parents did not feel comfortable addressing these issues directly with the production staff or parent volunteers, which is why these incidents were reported to PFLAG Salisbury.

On Sunday February 9th 2020, PFLAG Salisbury made a public statement via social media recognizing the concerns and expressing solidarity with the impacted students. A representative of PFLAG Salisbury made attempts to reach out to Rock and Roll Revival directors to engage in a dialogue about the complaints and how to best resolve them so as to insure that all students participating feel respected and included. These attempts at communication were ignored. We were very surprised to learn that, without speaking with us, Rock and Roll Revival representatives decided to remove the character from the production. PFLAG Salisbury do not hold the students responsible for these incidents, we do not want students to be further negatively impacted by these incidents, we did not ask for removal of the character, nor did we think full removal of the character was the appropriate solution to this issue.

PFLAG Salisbury recognizes that the character in question is only one small piece of a much larger systemic issue that exists, not only with this production, but also within our local public schools. We live in a time when the civil liberties of transgender people, in particular transgender children, are under both legal and social attack. Further, in recent years transgender women of color have been

disproportionately the victims of violent crime. Jokes about “men in dresses” do have a longstanding history in American comedy with the humor based around assumptions of the unattractive and subhuman nature of trans people. However, jokes about “men in dresses” are not the same thing as, nor should they be confused with, drag. When people laugh at the “man in a dress” gag they are equating gender with genitalia and they are dehumanizing people. Drag, on the other hand, intentionally plays on inverting gender norms, in a direct attempt to circumvent and criticize them, with the ultimate goal of advancing the liberation of LGBTQIA+ people. Further, the intended use of drag in any performance must be done with appropriate nuance and within a larger context so that it lands universally well with the audience. We are more than happy to work with any group or organization who intends to incorporate drag into a production so that it is well-placed and appropriately nuanced, allowing the incorporation of drag to not serve as offense to some but rather to have the intended comedic effect.

PFLAG Salisbury remains concerned with the larger issues of bullying and marginalization of LGBTQIA+ people that surround the production and pervade our public schools. These concerns are not the fault of the students involved. It is our belief, based on interactions with numerous families over the years, that the larger issues of bullying and exclusion that were reported to us in this production are not unique to James M. Bennett, but are pervasive across the County school system. Thus, properly addressing these issues requires more systemic changes to school climate, rather than the removal of a character from a production. We will continue to reach out to Rock and Roll Revival production staff to engage in dialogue around these issues; we would like the opportunity to assist Rock and Roll Revival improve the experiences of all youth, including LGBTQ+ youth, involved in their future productions. We also intend to be in contact with the Wicomico County Board of Education to address the larger more systemic issues of bullying present throughout the school district.

Salisbury PFLAG is a chapter of PFLAG national and actively works with a number of other local, regional, and national LGBTQ+ advocacy groups. PFLAG is the largest Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning/Queer (LGBTQ) ally organization in the nation. PFLAG envisions a world where diversity is celebrated and all people are respected, valued, and affirmed inclusive of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. By meeting people where they are and collaborating with others, PFLAG realizes its vision by providing support for families, allies, and people who are LGBTQ+; providing education about the unique issues and challenges facing people who are LGBTQ+; and providing advocacy in the community to change attitudes and create policies and laws that achieve full equality for people who are LGBTQ+.