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NEWS RELEASE

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PFLAG SALISBURY IS PROUD TO SERVE AS SIGNATORY ON AN AMICUS BRIEF SUBMITTED IN SUPPORT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY MARYLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

PFLAG Salisbury is pleased to serve as a signatory joining PFLAG National, Lambda Legal, and thirty-one other partner organizations in an amicus brief in *Mahmoud v. McKnight* in the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals in support of the Maryland school district that introduced storybooks with LGBTQ+ characters into the language arts curriculum.

The preponderance of research demonstrated that all Students Benefit from a school climate that promotes acceptance and respect. According to the United States Department of Education, School climates that foster a sense of belonging and community not only provide a more supportive learning environment in which children learn to respect those who differ from them, but also report better test scores, graduation rates, student engagement, mental and physical health, and brain development.

Numerous studies have shown that LGBTQ+ young people face particular risks, including in schools. According to the most 2021 GLSEN School Climate Survey: 90% of respondents reported that they had heard homophobic remarks in school, 78.8% reported avoiding school functions or extracurricular activities because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, and 68.0% of LGBTQ+ students felt unsafe at school because of their SOGIE (sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression) characteristics. These findings were recently affirmed by the needs assessment conducted by PFLAG Salisbury focused on the Eastern Shore and where overwhelmingly, respondents did not consider local schools to be safe for LGBTQ+ youth.

Inclusive storybooks advance appellees' compelling interest in ensuring a safe, supportive school environment in which all students can thrive. At PFLAG Salisbury, we believe that learners need to read books and be exposed to curriculum that act as both mirrors (seeing their identities and experiences reflected) and windows (learning about others' identities and experiences.) This means that students need to be able to see themselves and what they are learning as a reflection of themselves, but they also must be encouraged to see outwards and consider perspectives and experiences different from their own. The

result of exposing young people to only insular and homogenous materials forces them to develop a skewed, inaccurate version of the diversity of our society that extends the disconnect and marginalization of underrepresented groups – particularly LGBTQ+ students and students of color.

Montgomery County Public Schools have taken important steps to promote inclusive education by ensuring that its English Language Arts curriculum represents people with different backgrounds. Moreover, Montgomery County Public Schools has served as a model for inclusive education that those of us in rural parts of the state would like to see emulated. As such, the board of PFLAG Salisbury agrees with US District Court Judge Deborah Boardman's ruling that MCPS's reversal of the opt out policy did not burden the religious exercise of students as the existence and mention of LGBTQ+ individuals in literature is not a form of indoctrination. Accordingly, we proudly support Montgomery County Public Schools position that

“expects all classrooms to be inclusive and safe spaces for students, including those who identify as LGBTQ+ or have family members in the LGBTQ+ community. A broad representation of personal characteristics within curricular or instructional materials promotes this desired outcome. Therefore, as with all curriculum resources, there is an expectation that teachers utilize these inclusive lessons and texts with all students. Students and families may not choose to opt out of engaging with any instructional materials, other than ‘Family Life and Human Sexuality Unit of Instruction’ which is specifically permitted by Maryland law.”

PFLAG Salisbury is a chapter of PFLAG, the first and largest national organization dedicated to supporting, educating, and advocating for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning/Queer, plus (LGBTQ+) people and their families. To learn more about PFLAG Salisbury, visit www.SalisburyPFLAG.com and to read the amicus brief in full, visit http://www.salisburypflag.com/uploads/4/6/2/4/4624229/20231030_mahmoud-v-mcknight_amicus.pdf

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