

White County High School PRIDE Gay-Straight Alliance

Timeline of Events

Early January 2005:

Kerry Pacer first asked for permission to start a Gay-Straight Alliance (“GSA”) club at White County High School (WCHS) after Principal Bryan Dorsey denied her request to hang up posters around school advocating against anti-gay bullying. Although WCHS recognized non-curricular student groups, there was no formal policy outlining the process by which such clubs were formed or recognized.

Principal Dorsey demanded that Kerry first write a paper explaining her reasons for wanting to start a GSA. Other clubs haven’t been required to submit such a paper in order to form. Kerry immediately wrote and submitted a paper explaining that she wanted to start a GSA to reduce bullying of gay students at WCHS. Dorsey then informed Kerry that she could not start a GSA.

January 10, 2005:

Kerry, Charlene Hammersen, and several other students met with Principal Dorsey and Assistant Principal Sandy Bales to again request recognition of a GSA. The students handed over documents explaining WCHS’s legal obligation to recognize the club under the federal Equal Access Act, but Dorsey and Bales refused to recognize and discouraged the formation of the club.

January 20, 2005:

Kerry sent Superintendent Paul Shaw a written request for recognition of the GSA, requested a meeting with him to discuss the matter, and enclosed materials explaining WCHS’s legal obligations under the Equal Access Act.

January 24, 2005:

Kerry and several other students again met with Shaw and Dorsey to discuss the formation of a GSA; Shaw and Dorsey again discouraged formation of the club.

January 31, 2005:

Superintendent Shaw sent a letter to Kerry telling her that the club could start meeting but that the students needed to first provide Principal Dorsey with a list of proposed members, the name of a club faculty member, and a list of proposed by-laws before the GSA would be recognized. Other clubs haven’t had to meet such requirements in order to form. Kerry immediately provided Principal Dorsey with everything that Superintendent Shaw demanded.

February 3, 2005:

Superintendent Shaw sent out a mass e-mail to faculty and staff informing them that students were forming a GSA, and implied that the administration was opposed to the club, but that federal law required that the club be allowed to form.

February 4, 2005:

Principal Dorsey announced over the school public address system at WCHS that there was no gay-straight alliance yet and that he strongly disapproved of the club.

In the days that followed, as the GSA students waited for approval in order to begin meeting, Superintendent Shaw was interviewed on a local radio station, during which he explained that the club had not been approved and was only tentative. He was also interviewed on local television, where he stated said that the school was weighing the community's reaction and would do what was morally right.

February 7, 2005:

A closed meeting of the White County School District (WCSD) school board was held where it is believed that board members discussed whether to recognize the GSA. The school board has never before been involved in deciding whether to recognize other non-curricular student groups. Afterward, Principal Dorsey told the GSA's faculty advisor that she could not yet meet with the club.

February 8, 2005:

Superintendent Shaw sent out another mass e-mail to faculty and staff, falsely claiming that no paperwork had been submitted by the GSA and explaining that he and the principal believed that the rules should be changed regarding formation of clubs and promising to consider all options before allowing the clubs to form.

February 9, 2005:

Kerry and others students met with Dorsey and Bales again to discuss official approval of the GSA. All requirements to start the club had been satisfied, but Dorsey and Bales again refused to give official approval of the club, saying that the school was still figuring out what needed to be done. On that same day, the ACLU wrote to Shaw and Dorsey demanding that they recognize the club as required by federal law.

February 23, 2005:

The club's faculty advisor met with several of the potential club members, suggesting that they could get official approval to start the club if they would agree to change their name, mission, and by-laws to avoid emphasizing that the focus of the club was on supporting gay students. The students thought that if they did this, they'd finally receive the approval for which they'd been waiting nearly two months. Shortly thereafter, the students submitted a letter to Principal Dorsey informing him of their decision to allow the club to be called "Peers Rising In Diverse Education" (PRIDE) and submitted a revised set of by-laws reflecting the new name and a reworded mission statement that shifted the focus of the club to ending harassment and bullying more generally, but didn't eliminate the support of gay students from the mission altogether.

February 24, 2005:

The president of the WCSD school board read the letter that announced the name change and the reworded mission statement at a school board meeting. She announced that the board would take public comments on the club but that no decision would be made that evening about whether to approve the club.

February 25, 2005:

Kerry submitted a letter to Principal Dorsey clarifying that although the club was changing its name and revising its by-laws slightly it was remaining a GSA.

March 21, 2005:

Nearly three months after first requesting to start a GSA club, the students were finally informed that they could meet on campus during non-instructional time, but only if Assistant Principal Bales were present at every meeting. No other non-curricular student group had been forced to meet such a requirement, and no other non-curricular student group has had to wait so long for recognition.

March 24, 2005:

The WCSD school board announced that it was considering eliminating all non-curricular student groups at WCHS at the start of the 2005-06 school year.

April 20, 2005:

PRIDE members hung up posters around school announcing their first meeting. Most of these posters were torn down by other students. Several PRIDE members witnessed the vandalism and reported the names of those responsible to Assistant Principal Bales. Bales, however, admonished the club members for reporting the destruction of their property and told them not to bother her with such information.

No discipline resulted from the eyewitness accounts of the vandalism. However, Charlene was disciplined by Assistant Principal Bales for alleged dishonesty in reporting the vandalism and given three days of in-school suspension as punishment. When Charlene's father went to the school to discuss the matter with Bales, she told him that these clubs should not be in schools.

Early April, 2005:

PRIDE finally had its first meeting on campus during non-instructional time. During the remainder of the school year, the club was only able to meet two more times. At these meetings, club members discussed, among other things, the harassment of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students at WCHS. None of these meetings caused any disruption to the school environment.

Summer, 2005:

A new policy was enacted that purports to prohibit all non-curricular student groups at WCHS. Relying on the new policy, WCHS has not allowed PRIDE to meet during the 2005/2006 school year.

Throughout the 2005/2006 school year, several clubs have been allowed to continue meeting at WCHS, even though they don't participate in activities relevant to any class or the curriculum, academic credit is not provided for participation in them, and participation in them isn't required for any course. Those clubs include:

- Shooting Club
- Student Council
- Youth Advisory Council
- Beta Club
- WCHS Dance Team
- Future Family, Careers and Community Leaders of America ("FCCLA")

Several of those clubs were considered non-curricular before this school year, but WCHS now calls them curricular, although there's been no apparent change in the purpose and activities of the clubs. Additionally, a group of students has been allowed to meet on campus before school to discuss religion and pray together. The WCHS administration has allowed this group of students to meet, use the school public address system to publicize their meetings, and hand out bracelets to publicize their meetings while prohibiting other students from doing likewise. This student group is non-curricular.