# Montgomery County curriculum controversy sparks national debate on parental rights and LGBTQ+ education



During the summer of 2023, a significant controversy arose in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in Rockville, Maryland, over a curriculum that included books featuring LGBTQ+ characters and themes. This large school system, the largest in Maryland with more than 160,000 students, had for years sought to diversify its curriculum to reflect the identities of its student body. However, the decision to discontinue an opt-out policy that allowed parents to exempt their children from such readings sparked protests and legal battles involving Muslim and Christian families, among others, in the county.

In March 2023, MCPS administrators announced that families would no longer be able to opt out of these lessons, a policy shift that surprised many parents in this generally liberal-leaning suburb of Washington, D.C. Parents from a variety of faith backgrounds expressed opposition, arguing that the books prompted classroom discussions about gender identity and sexual orientation that conflicted with their religious beliefs. One parent, Tamer Mahmoud, addressed the school board stating, “Taking away the opt-out option when such material conflicts with a child’s faith violates our First Amendment rights to practice our faith freely without discrimination.”

The books in question were part of an effort during the 2022–2023 school year to offer literature from prekindergarten through 12th grade featuring LGBTQ+ themes. Titles included “Pride Puppy,” about a dog attending a Pride parade, and “Love, Violet,” which tells the story of a girl considering giving a valentine to another girl. These were introduced alongside a curriculum already aimed at increasing racial diversity, reflecting the school system’s intention to be inclusive of all family types.

However, some school principals voiced concerns in late 2022 about the potential divisiveness of the materials. They reported that parents had strongly opposing views—some demanded their children be excused from lessons involving LGBTQ+ content, while others supported its use. A memo from administrators highlighted the delicate position principals faced, warning that inconsistent application across schools could damage community relations.

Despite these concerns and some initial allowances by principals and teachers permitting opt-outs, the school system’s central administration in March 2023 took a firm stance, stating that Maryland law only authorises opt-outs for sex education, not for other curricular content on gender or sexuality. This policy change was met with increased mobilisation from parents opposing the new restrictions. Wael Elkoshairi, a Muslim parent of five children, expressed surprise and worry about some students’ reactions to the materials, citing incidents such as a child crying over her family structure and the guidance given to teachers to affirm that “our body parts do not decide our gender,” in response to children’s questions.

Throughout 2023, parents opposing the policy participated in multiple school board meetings and rallies, seeking accommodations rather than removal of the books. Elkoshairi emphasised their position: “We understand this is a pluralistic society... But what we’re saying is, when there’s an issue that contradicts some of our teaching, then we want an accommodation.” Meanwhile, the school board maintained that the books were consistent with their mission to provide a representative curriculum. Officials, including then-superintendent Monifa McKnight, insisted the materials did not promote any ‘gender ideology’ but aimed to develop students’ literary analysis skills. McKnight addressed the community with an anti-hate speech in support of the books.

Opposing voices on the matter also formed coalitions to defend the inclusivity of the curriculum. Philip Alexander Downie, a Montgomery County resident and co-chairman of the Coalition for Inclusive Schools and Communities, said of the controversy: “We are discussing our children’s right to be seen, our families’ right to exist without erasure... The opposition has tried to frame this as parental choice, but at its core, it’s about whose humanity is validated in the classroom.”

A group of parents eventually took legal action, filing a lawsuit against MCPS, asserting that the removal of the opt-out option violated their First Amendment rights by compelling their children to participate in lessons contravening their religious beliefs. Tamer Mahmoud’s family was among the plaintiffs. However, a federal judge denied their request for a preliminary injunction that would allow temporary opt-outs, ruling that the parents had not demonstrated coercion or indoctrination violating religious beliefs. Their subsequent appeal was also declined.

The legal dispute escalated to the U.S. Supreme Court, which agreed to hear the case, Mahmoud v. Taylor, with oral arguments scheduled for June 2024. The case holds broader implications for parental rights versus school authority in public education, especially concerning discussions on gender identity and sexuality.

Since the litigation began, the Montgomery County school system has undergone significant changes. Half of the school board members facing the controversy were voted out in subsequent elections. Monifa McKnight resigned after requests from board members, and Thomas Taylor became the new superintendent. The school system also changed its English language arts curriculum provider, and it is unclear how frequently the contested books are currently used. Two titles identified in the lawsuit have been removed from instruction because they compelled teachers to explicitly teach certain vocabulary outside the lesson context.

Some parents, including Elkoshairi, have withdrawn their children from MCPS, opting for homeschooling to avoid exposure to the contested material. Elkoshairi’s youngest daughter, who was in second grade during the policy dispute, is now a fourth-grader taught at home.

Eric Baxter, the lawyer representing the parents seeking an opt-out provision, commented on the situation: “This is a real burden on these people, and they’re making real sacrifices to just try to preserve their children’s innocence during their elementary years.”

As the Supreme Court prepares to hear the case, Montgomery County Public Schools remain at the centre of a national debate on the extent of parental influence in public school curricula, religious freedoms, and the place of LGBTQ+ topics in early education.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://wjpitch.com/news/2024/10/04/mcps-parents-appeal-to-supreme-court-in-recent-lgbtq-books-case/> - This source corroborates the filing of a lawsuit by a group of Montgomery County Public Schools parents, including Tamer Mahmoud, opposing the removal of the opt-out option for LGBTQ-themed curriculum, and their appeal to the Supreme Court in the case Mahmoud v. Taylor.
* <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2025/04/18/supreme-court-weighs-parents-rights-to-opt-out-of-lgbtq-school-curriculum/> - This article confirms that the Supreme Court is set to hear the case concerning parental rights to opt children out of LGBTQ-themed lessons and details about the curriculum content including books like 'Pride Puppy' and related classroom discussions on gender identity.
* <https://www.advocate.com/news/school-opt-out-challenged> - This source supports the claim that the Montgomery County school district eliminated the opt-out policy in 2023 for lessons featuring LGBTQ+ content, citing disruption to the educational process and stigmatization concerns, consistent with the policy shift described in the article.
* <https://www.washingtonblade.com/2025/01/22/supreme-court-to-consider-case-against-montgomery-county-public-schools/> - This report confirms the Supreme Court's agreement to consider the case regarding the rights of Montgomery County parents to opt their children out of LGBTQ-specific lessons taught in public schools.
* <https://www.k12dive.com/news/maryland-lgbtq-curriculum-opt-out-case-Supreme-Court-petition-LGBTQ/727100/> - This source provides background on the legal dispute over the opt-out policy, emphasizing the First Amendment arguments around religious freedoms and the Maryland law that only authorizes opt-outs for sex education, not for other curricular content.