

Addressing the San Lorenzo Valley School District: An Inappropriate Display of the Rainbow Flag

I. Introduction

Statement – It is inappropriate for the San Lorenzo Valley Unified School District to fly the “Rainbow Flag,” or the “Pride Flag,” over public school campuses for any reason, including in recognition of Harvey Milk Day.

Caveat – What follows is not an attack on individuals holding to an LGBTQ+ lifestyle and belief. Rather, it is a matter of civics and civic responsibility. It’s about what is appropriate and inappropriate for a public institution. What follows is part of an effort to preserve space in the public-school arena for students and educators of religious conviction who do not want to be ostracized by a flag or forced to subsume their convictions to the SLVUSD’s decision.

II. Summary

The decision (past and present) by the SLVUSD Board of Trustees to fly the Rainbow Flag is inappropriate for the following reasons, each of which is addressed further below:

- An inappropriate assertion of authority
- A question of official bias
- A violation of religious conscience
- Unnecessary and divisive
- A violation of SLVUSD Board of Trustees policy

III. Discussion

A. An Inappropriate Assertion of Authority

A flag is a statement of authority, a pronouncement of consequential influence. Flying a flag above a facility is to assert authority by that which the flag represents over the location in question – including the mission and people associated with that location. Per district policy, our national flag and the flag of California warrant display at any public-school facility. Both the United States and the State of California have a true claim on the allegiance of residents in the SLVUSD, and thus rightly demand appropriate submission to their authority. Hence, it is right for these flags to fly over SLVUSD campuses. Such is not the case with the LGBTQ+

movement and its flag. The Rainbow Flag makes a social, political, and even religious statement that many cannot accept or condone. The constituents of the SLVUSD do not owe allegiance to the LGBTQ+ movement, and thus its flag does not belong in a public-school space. Of course, this does not preclude someone's display of the Rainbow Flag on private property for reasons of their own.

In considering this matter of authority, it's important to note the words of Gilbert Baker, the creator of the Rainbow Flag. Consider the following statements taken from Gilbert Baker's memoir (available at www.gilbertbaker.com; see the "*Rainbow Flag: Origin Story*"), and notice in particular the words bolded by the author of this paper:

"I thought of the American flag...I thought of the vertical red, white, and blue tricolor from the French Revolution and how both flags owed their beginnings to a riot, a rebellion, or revolution. I thought a **gay nation** should have a flag too, to proclaim its own **idea of power**."

"As a community, both local and international, gay people were in the midst of an upheaval, a battle for equal rights, a shift in status where we were now demanding power, taking it. This was our new **revolution**: a **tribal**, **individualistic**, and **collective** vision. It deserved a new symbol."

"After the orgy of bunting and hoopla surrounding the Bicentennial, I thought of flags in a new light. I discovered the depth of their **power**, their **transcendent**, **transformational** quality. I thought of the emotional connection they hold. I thought how most flags represented a place. They were primarily **nationalistic**, **territorial**, **iconic propaganda** - all things we questioned in the 70's. Gay people were tribal, individualistic, a global collective that was expressing itself in art and politics. We needed a flag to fly everywhere."

Clearly Baker thought of the Rainbow Flag as a statement of authority; a statement of power; a thing tribalistic and nationalistic to be used when claiming territory. How is it then appropriate to fly such a flag over a public school; a public institution funded with public tax dollars? How is the Board of Trustees missing what Baker clearly understood?

B. A Question of Official Bias

The Rainbow Flag communicates a social and political message beyond the pale of what is appropriate for a public school. Flying such a flag effectively demands, albeit implicitly, that those associated with the district's schools accept truth claims asserted by LGBTQ+ advocates. And yet, those truth claims run directly contrary to the deeply held religious convictions of many in our society, including at least some of the students in our schools. Since when did it become appropriate for a public school to blatantly prefer the socio-political message of one party in the profoundly moral questions of sexuality and gender? Additionally, if the SLVUSD has determined to fly one partisan flag, then when will it give

equal time to other expressions of cultural, political, or religious viewpoints? Why can we not content ourselves with the flags of our country and our state? As you will see below, the Board of Trustees own policies prohibit the district or its teachers from adopting a partisan stance in controversial matters.

C. A Violation of Conscience

Especially in the context of a public institution (like a school), when someone walks into a building displaying a flag, that person comes, both literally and figuratively, under the authority, or the message, of what the flag represents (see above). Consider a student walking onto the SLVHS campus and passing underneath the Rainbow Flag. The flag implicitly says that by attending SLVHS the student must submit themselves to the demands and truth claims asserted by the LGBTQ+ movement. And yet, as stated already, we have students who daily attend SLVUSD schools and, as a matter of deep, sincere, religious conviction, believe contrary to the LGBTQ+ worldview. By flying the Rainbow Flag, the SLVUSD implicitly tells these students that their convictions are false, their perspective bigoted, and their opinion not welcome. What's more, because these students *must* attend campus as a matter of their public-school enrollment, their submission to the flag is thereby *coerced*. Thus, the district coercively violates the religious conscience of budding young men and women entrusted to its care.

To make this point even stronger, consider again Gilbert Baker, the creator of the Rainbow Flag. Baker was well-known in San Francisco for his drag queen attire and actions. On at least two occasions, Baker donned one particular costume dubbed his "Pink Jesus" outfit (see *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Gilbert Baker, the 'gay Betsy Ross,'" June 21, 2018). The ensemble consisted of Baker spray-painting his body pink, wearing an American flag loincloth, a pink crown of thorns, pink high heels, and carrying a pink balsa wood cross. How is forcing students of religious conviction to acknowledge the flag designed by this man not a violation of their conscience?

D. Unnecessary and Divisive

Flying the Rainbow Flag is not necessary to the district's mission of "Working Together to Ensure All Students Learn and are fully Prepared for College and Career." In fact, flying the flag runs counter to this mission. It increases division amongst students and district families amidst an already polarized and divided cultural context (note again Baker's words above). The district can encourage respect and true tolerance between students without violating the conscience of those who hold strong religious beliefs.

- By flying the flag, the district clearly aligns itself with one side of the issue, thereby excluding the sincerely held religious convictions of those in the care of SLVUSD schools.
- The district's action in flying the Rainbow Flag have a chilling effect on students' ability to express opposite opinions in the classroom, or in conversation with their peers.

IV. What Can You Do?

What can you do in response to the SLVUSD Board of Trustees determination? Please consider the following:

1. If you are an educator, consider voicing your opposition or concern to your school's administration, to the SLVUSD Superintendent (Mr. Christopher Schiermeyer), and to the Board of Trustees directly. Consider absencing yourself from work during the 2-6 May timeframe when the Board will fly the Rainbow Flag.
2. If you are a teacher, support students in your classroom who hold religious convictions contrary to the LGBTQ+ worldview. You can do this even as you respect and support students who adhere to LGBTQ+ beliefs and lifestyle. Encourage your students to respect one another while they engage in honest, and perhaps difficult, conversations.
3. If you are a parent, consider keeping your student at home during the week of 2-6 May. Even if you are not someone of religious conviction, you may consider taking such action as a matter of civic responsibility. It is important for tax-paying, voting citizens to call our public institutions to account.
4. Consider voicing your opposition or concern to the Board of Trustees directly.
5. If you are someone with legal contacts or expertise, consider whether the Board of Trustees' actions can be challenged in court.
6. If you would like more information, please email pjdavis200406@gmail.com.