

Public Comments for School Board Meetings

#720

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ACHS safety and hallways

Full Name *

Dr. Matthew Henry

What is your relationship to ACPS? *

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I am both a city resident and teacher at ACHS. Growing up, I have always been ready to defend who I was. I have always been okay with who I was. It is other people who have the problem. I never thought that I would have to defend myself at my place of employment, defend myself from the very people I have been called to educate, protect and serve. The problem is I am not allowed to defend myself with students.

I managed hallways in high school, open and out by my senior year in 1994. I had to deal with whispers and rumors, but no one, not to my recollection, ever called me faggot to my face. My little sister got a lot of it after I came out (and probably before) and has always been one of my fiercest protectors—both coming to my defense in the moment as well as shielding me from what she heard from people who were supposed to be my peers, teammates and friends. I know my older siblings would do the same for me—and probably have. But I don't need protection. Students here who might identify as LGBTQ+ might.

I managed late nights and early mornings on the streets of DC, areas not frequented by most as gay venues were often in empty parts of town or up and coming neighborhoods. There is a reason we call them safe spaces. To my recollection, and I am very lucky in this, I have never been called that word to my face in 25 years of living and going out in DC, New York, LA, and many other cities large and small, or in towns even smaller and more conservative. I have always been prepared to defend myself if the need arose. Getting from point A to B, safe space to safe space, safely has long been my goal in navigating this world. It's why I walk so fast and why I'm the

'dad' of my friend group, making sure everyone gets to where they need to. I have adopted a stone cold pissed-off face for much of my life outside of those safe spaces so that strangers knew not to mess with me when walking somewhere alone at night. I know this is a privilege I have as a male. I am always very aware of my surroundings and who is around me. I am one of the few, maybe the only, in my friend group who has not been beaten up, mugged, harassed or threatened accompanied by that word simply for existing.

In my 13 years at ACHS, a school I love, I have never previously been called faggot to my face. I have never been made to feel less than by any student that I can recall due to my sexuality, even if their religion, culture, church, neighborhood, friends or family tells them otherwise. Twice now this year, students have used that word toward me simply because I have asked them to go to class. Twice within a month's time: November 13th and December 13th. Twice now. A third time I was physically threatened, though that word was not used. Responding today to a question from a student wandering the halls about what block it was, I replied "It's third block, which is where you should be heading now" "We ain't talkin' to you, faggot" was the reply from another student in the group.

I am not allowed to defend myself in these incidents, incidents that had they happened anywhere off campus, a nearby town, a street in another city, a street in THIS city, I most certainly would be prepared to defend myself. I would have to be. Here, we count on the administration and this district to defend us when needed through quick and efficient consequences. And I feel like my school and district is letting me down. This is why I'm so shaken by this. I am not allowed to defend myself and my instinct is to defend, both myself and others especially LGBTQ+ students, in all aspects of my life. I have always been a defender. I tried the teachable moment strategy in the November incident, but it grew uncomfortable as I was surrounded, and as the word kept getting directed at me, yes, it felt unsafe. The word 'faggot' immediately alerts me and other LGBTQ+ people that a situation is now dangerous. The response by campus leaders was very unsatisfactory.

I, and other staff and students, should not be made to feel unsafe, through verbal or physical assault or threat thereof, at a place of employment and education. On the other hand, we've seemingly created a safe space for aggressive kids who

don't want to be in a classroom and who have chosen not to participate in their education—safe for them to hang out all day and negatively impact the majority of students and staff.

The hallways of this school are an absolute NIGHTMARE. I love being an educator, I love this school, and teaching is something I think I'm really good at. Many in this building feel the same. It saddens me that a small group of students in this school is taking that away from us and is forcing many of us to look for off ramps.

Dr. Henry
