

My name is Alyssa Harbin and I am a sophomore at MacArthur High School, a school that has been widely mentioned in the news this past school year. During the 2020-2021 school year we had a principal that allowed teachers and other staff members to hang certain “allyship stickers”, which are circular rainbow stickers about 1 inch in diameter, on their doors or windows to their classroom. You may have even seen these stickers in a local business, college campus as it is a universally accepted practice. This was a GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) initiative approved by the principal at the time in order to create a “safe space” in which LGBTQ youth could feel accepted by staff members, which was an obvious need. This goal was, for the most part, reached as I, a member of the LGBTQ community myself, and others felt we could trust our teachers and the administration as a whole.

At the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year, we had a new principal arrive, Natasha Stewart, and within the first month of school stickers were stripped and scratched from the doors. With no communication given to either staff or students, confusion spread throughout the school as well as feelings of dread and apprehension. Within the next month, the district declared that the stickers coming down was a district decision and sent out a guideline stating that the stickers came down because they were not “curriculum-based”. However, this did not make sense for many reasons. First, other high schools in the district were allowed to keep their stickers up, seen through social media and first person through volleyball games. The district went back and forth stating that it was a district decision at times and that it was Ms. Stewart’s decision at other times. Next, there are an incredible amount of other posters, hangings, or even discussions that are not curriculum based, but these weren’t taken down. Lastly, when a teacher of mine asked if she had to take down her stickers and/or posters that had Christian implications or Bible quotes since they were not curriculum based, she was brushed off as the administration said “Oh, that’s fine.” This forced the GSA, members of the LGBTQ community, and allies to consider that this action was taken due to prejudice or even hatred. Due to the inconsistency and confusion the district had created, the fear continued to settle in, but the fight was far from over.

On September 16th 2021, I was called into an Human Resources meeting and told me they were doing a “randomly selected” investigation about the stickers and specifically how our administration had handled the situation. However, it was hard to believe that this was “random” since everyone selected was in or associated with GSA. I was told I was “not in trouble”, but I felt intimidated and scared that I had done something wrong as I was sat at the head of the table with four adults whom I had never met. Three of these adults were questioning me and one was supposed to be my “advocate”. I was never told that she was my advocate and she certainly did not do just that- advocate for me. As I wasn’t given the option to call my parents or request that they were there, I was completely and utterly on my own as a fifteen year old. I was stripped of privacy, forced to speak when I was clearly not ready, and asked about LGBTQ pins I had on my badge, a rainbow sticker on my chromebook, how I felt with the stickers gone, bullying in my school, and, lastly, how the administration and specific admin members had handled this situation. Sitting at that long table was terrifying. Imagine yourself, as an already insecure teenager worrying about your personal rights being denied at school, having to deal with a table of unfamiliar adults. This meeting and worries of being bullied, expelled, or worse caused me to have a subsequent panic attack and massive anxiety for a good portion of the year.

The situation resulted in teachers fighting for their students and general safety which resulted in two of these teachers being put on administrative leave. At this point, the students had had enough as well. Just over a week after the HR meeting, the idea of a possible walkout spread throughout the school with hopes of attracting awareness. Since our voices were not being heard, we felt news presence might give us the platforms to change that. On September 22nd 2021, over 300 students walked out of the school holding rainbow flags and showing off stickers with the goal of our story gaining traction. It boomed. We were on almost every local news channel and I, personally, was in news articles in over 5 countries, as I had spoken at a board meeting. In late March and early April of 2021, I had also spoken with several news channels in hopes of making some type of impact. However, the administration stood their ground, seemingly treating this issue as an act of stubbornness, not wanting the best for the students.

Since this walkout, there have been many more acts of protest to the stickers. For starters, five teachers, including the two teachers put on administrative leave, filed a formal grievance in front of the school board, asking the members to reinstate the stickers and reconsider the firing of Rachel Stonecipher, an amazing AP and journalism teacher. My AP Chemistry teacher, Jennifer Espinoza, participated in the grievance and has been very active for the community and a clear advocate of the students. This has been scary for both me and her because of the fear that she may be the next teacher on the chopping block, despite the value she brings to MacArthur High School. The board quickly dismissed the teachers' hard work and voted to keep the stickers down, one board member even laughing as she seconded the board's decision. This laugh, that simple laugh, made an entire group of people feel like they are worth nothing. Seen as nothing in the eyes of the administration "looking over the students", making decisions for the students, supposedly "doing what's *best for the students*".

Since the grievance, I've spoken at another meeting and the president, Randy Randle, won't even meet my eye. What else am I to do when my voice is not being heard? It is so unbelievably frustrating to speak about feeling unsafe at school, take time away from my incredibly busy schedule to fight for my teachers, and be unheard when discussing basic rights. As for now- nothing major has changed. I am forever grateful to my mom who has given her all into protecting me through speaking at the board, emailing the administration members, joining the Ad Hoc Committee, and whitelisting several pro-gay websites that had previously been blocked by the district, such as Trevor Project, GSA network, GLSEN, Resource Center, Human Rights Campaign, Equality Texas, and Lambda Legal although, in my opinion, none of these websites should have been blocked in the first place. However, there are still no stickers, both teachers put on administrative leave are no longer employed at MacArthur, and I continue to speak with seemingly nobody on the other end. I really cannot express how belittled I feel because of their unrelenting indifference to students who want to feel safe and accepted in a place of learning. Even now as I write this congressional testimony, I have little hope that my voice will be heard by the administration or that any change will occur. The biggest breach of trust for our community is that the administration hasn't been doing their job- to ensure the safety of all students. This guideline did the opposite when it clearly affected one group, so what else are we supposed to feel other than targeted? No matter what, I will continue to fight for the rest of my high school experience.