

# [***A Pennsylvania school district canceled a gay '30 Rock' actor's event, citing his 'lifestyle.' Parents are fighting back.***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BV3-NNT1-DY7V-G03D-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Parents in a Pennsylvania school district are petitioning to overturn a unanimous vote by the school board to cancel a talk from "30 Rock" actor Maulik Pancholy, over concerns about his "activism" and "lifestyle."

Pancholy, who is gay and a children's book author, was scheduled to speak at Mountain View Middle School in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, on May 22. But the Cumberland Valley School District (CVSD) voted unanimously on Monday to cancel his visit.

More than 6,000 people [*have signed a petition*](https://www.change.org/p/reinstate-empathy-and-anti-bullying-assembly-at-mountain-view-middle-school?source_location=tag_) started by Trisha Comstock, a parent in the school district, demanding that the board reverse their decision.

Pancholy, who is known for voicing Baljeet in the cartoon "Phineas and Ferb" and for his role as the assistant on the TV show "30 Rock," has written [*two award-winning children's books*](https://www.maulikpancholy.com/books) that focus on themes of empathy and anti-bullying.

"Nikhil Out Loud" follows the story of a gay Indian American boy at a school where parents protested having a gay student play a lead role in the school musical. Another of Pancholy's award-winning titles, "The Best at It," is about a 7th-grade Indian American who experiences bullying in his small Midwest town.

Although the school district livestreamed Monday's board meeting, it does not archive the videos.

Pancholy's event was not on the meeting's agenda, but when board members began discussing whether it should be canceled, Comstock told CNN she started [*screen recording*](https://www.facebook.com/trisha.r.comstock/videos/1099126411344082/). She later posted the video to [*social media*](https://www.facebook.com/trisha.r.comstock/videos/1099126411344082/) and shared a copy with CNN.

Board members who spoke during the meeting said they were concerned about the topics Pancholy would discuss while speaking about his books.

"He labels himself as an activist, he is proud of his lifestyle, and I don't think that should be imposed uponour students at any age," CVSD board member Bud Shaffner said during the meeting.

Board member Kelly Potteiger echoed Shaffner's concerns about Pancholy discussing his "lifestyle."

"He did say that's not the topic but that's what his books are about and he will probably talk about his pathway, because he talks about anti-bullying, and empathy and inclusion so part of that is his journey," Potteiger said. "That's where, as a self-proclaimed activist, that's where it gets concerning, I think."

Ultimately, the board voted unanimously to cancel the event.

Pancholy responded to the district's decision in [*a statement posted on Instagram*](https://www.instagram.com/p/C56xj0-PnKz/?hl=en) Thursday, thanking the community for their "outpouring of solidarity, love, and support."

"When I visit schools, my 'activism' is to let all young people know that they're seen. To let them know that they matter. When I talk about the characters in my books feeling 'different,' I'm always surprised by how many young people raise their hands - regardless of their identities and backgrounds - wanting to share about the ways in which they, too, feel different," Pancholy said in the statement.

"That's the power of books. They build empathy. I wonder why a school board is so afraid of that?"

Comstock, whose two sons attended Mountain View middle school and now attend the district's high school, says she was watching the livestream of the board meeting from her phone while in bed Monday night, when members began saying things she felt were "bigoted and homophobic."

"I remember my mouth hanging open," Comstock told CNN. "I couldn't believe what was being said, and that no one was even addressing it or correcting it. And then, when the vote was unanimous, my heart sank."

Later that evening, while trying to fall asleep, Comstock said she was haunted by what she heard during that meeting. Instead of sleeping, she got up and started the petition.

It has since garnered thousands of signatures, many accompanied by frustrated comments from local students, staff members, and families.

"I have not only been contacted by parents in the district, and students who feel silenced and not heard, but I was also contacted privately by teachers - teachers that are openly gay - that watched the meeting and cried and said, 'Am I welcome here? Do I belong?,'" Comstock said.

The Cumberland Valley School District, CVSD board members, and Mountain View Middle School did not respond to CNN's request for comment.

Despite the district's decision, Comstock said she has found reason to feel hopeful.

"What is absolutely beautiful about this, the silver lining, is our community has stood up and said this is not right," Comstock said. "This is not who we are and we need to address this."

Doubting if we belong

Brooke Ryerson, a gay student who used to attend Mountain View Middle School and now attends the district's high school, says she "couldn't believe" what she was hearing when she watched the board meeting livestream.

"They're blatantly sending the message that they don't think LGBTQ+ stories and lives belong in our schools. To the countless students and staff at CV who are part of the LGBTQ+ community, and especially at Mountain View Middle School, this just strengthens that lingering doubt if we really belong," Brooke, 16, told CNN.

During the board meeting, another member, Matthew Barrick, said he wants "***politics*** out of our school."

Parents have criticized the board's disapproval of so-called activists, noting that Moms for Liberty, a right-wing group that focuses on a range of school-related initiatives, had [*advocated*](https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=237822465970056&set=pb.100092269134151.-2207520000) for Potteiger's appointment to the school district's board.

[*Moms for Liberty,*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/03/us/moms-for-liberty-scandal-opposition/index.html) founded in 2021, champions banning certain books from schools, especially LGBTQ+ related titles, outlawing classroom discussions on gender and sexuality and halting lessons on so-called "[*critical race theory.*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/14/us/critical-race-theory-what-is-it/index.html)"

Colby Zebel, whose daughter Willow is a 7th grade student at the middle school where the event was going to take place, told CNN the board's decision sends a message to students that they are "not concerned about bullying, especially if you are gay."

"My daughter is furious. She is upset about missing the talk, but more importantly the way this decision was made and the apparent reasons for it. It is also clear to her that the primary reason for the cancellation is the fact that the presenter is gay," Zebel told CNN.

"The attempt to walk this back and claim that he is a political activist does not hold up. I reviewed his website and while the term 'activist' is prominent, anti-bullying is the only focus, and ***politics*** is never mentioned."

Comstock also took issue with the board labeling Pancholy an activist.

"Anyone can go to his site and see that his activism is around bullying," Comstock said. "If we're going to class activists as threats to our students, then we could never host a Mothers Against Drunk (Driving), or drunk driving event, because they're activists."

The reason why Pancholy wrote the children's stories, he says, is because he never saw himself in books and South Asian-American or LGBTQ+ characters "didn't exist" for him.

"And when I set out to write my own novels so many years later, I was still hard-pressed to find those stories. It's why I wrote my books in the first place. Because representation matters," he wrote in his statement.

"I hope that every single student at MVMS is receiving that message of support and love. That you know that regardless of who you are, you belong. To each of you: I see you. I appreciate you. You matter. No one can take that away from you."

Brooke's mom, Valarie Ryerson, told CNN the district is known for "the very best administrators, teachers, guidance counselors and staff," many of whom are gay,she said.

"Mr. Shaffner's comments that kids should not be 'exposed' to a gay speaker turned my stomach, knowing that we have so many members of the LGBQT+ community in our schools, teachers, and students - including my daughter - who now feel completely devalued, unwelcome and unsafe," Ryerson said.

"I've been very lucky to have so much support from my family and in school," Brooke said.

"But it must be terrifying for kids who aren't open about their identities to be hearing things like this being said by people with so much control and power."

By Alaa Elassar, CNN

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