

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

YOUTH FREE EXPRESSION

April 21, 2022

Board of Trustees
Turlock Unified School District
1574 E Canal Dr, Turlock, CA 95380

Re: Cancellation of "Be More Chill"

Dear Board members:

The National Coalition Against Censorship is an alliance of national nonprofit groups dedicated to protecting freedom of expression, including artistic expression and the rights of K-12 students, teachers and staff. We are writing in response to media reports that the district has canceled performances of Turlock High School's spring musical, "Be More Chill," by Joe Iconis and Joe Tracz. We urge the district to reschedule performances of the musical, which is the Tony Award winning story of a high school student's efforts to fit in.

It is our understanding that, after one public performance of the play, the remaining three scheduled performances were canceled because of concerns that the content of the play is not suitable for younger audience members.

The cancellation of those performances raises serious concerns about freedom of expression. Although the school certainly has an interest in ensuring that young children are not exposed to material which the school deems not age-appropriate, the Supreme Court made clear twenty-five years ago that a government policy that "effectively suppresses a large amount of speech that adults have a constitutional right to receive and to address to one another ... is unacceptable if less restrictive alternatives would be at least as effective in achieving the legitimate purpose that the [policy] was enacted to serve." *Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union*, 521 US 844, 874 (1997).

It is clear that the district has an obvious alternative to cancellation: It can simply limit admission to persons above a particular age. That would achieve the district's purpose, while preserving the right of older members of the community to see the play, as well as the right of Turlock High School students to present the play.

"Be More Chill" has been performed in many schools around the country, and in 2019 South Eugene High School was invited to perform the play at the International Thespian Festival. The production of the play at Turlock High School seems to have been approved by the administration, and canceling it at such a late date on the basis of a few complaints sends a discouraging message to the students who have worked hard in rehearsing and producing the

play and also casts doubt on the professionalism of school decisions that can be reversed so easily and at such great cost to the student body.

Board Policy 5145.2 states that the Board of Trustees “believes that free inquiry and exchange of ideas are essential parts of a democratic education[,]” and that it “respects students' rights to express ideas and opinions, take stands on issues, and support causes, even when such speech is controversial or unpopular.” We ask that you uphold those principles by rescheduling the canceled performances of “Be More Chill.”

Thank you for your attention to this important matter, and please let us know if we can be of any assistance in helping you navigate these often-contentious issues.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris Finan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Christopher Finan
Executive Director
National Coalition Against Censorship