

# Author Nicholas Sparks Accused of Banning LGBT Club at School He Co-Founded: Report

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Nicholas Sparks is locked in legal battle with the former headmaster of the school he co-founded amid claims that *The Notebook* author fostered a discriminatory environment, even once allegedly banning students from forming an LGBT club.

The best-selling romance novelist, 53, co-founded the Epiphany School of Global Studies in New Bern, North Carolina in 2006, as an institution “anchored in the Judeo-Christian commandment to Love God and Your Neighbor as Yourself,” according to its mission statement.

Saul Benjamin came on as CEO and headmaster in 2013, and, upon noticing the school was lacking in diversity, took it upon himself to implement change, according to an extensive report by *The Daily Beast*.

But those changes reportedly backfired, and Benjamin sued the school’s Board of Trustees, which includes Sparks, in 2014, accusing the author of homophobia, racism and anti-Semitism.

Sparks responded to the *Daily Beast* report in a statement that dismissed Benjamin’s accusations as “false,” and praised the welcoming nature of Epiphany.

“Since 2014, I have vigorously been defending the lawsuit brought against me and the Epiphany School of Global Studies by its former headmaster, Saul Benjamin. The article appearing in today’s *The Daily Beast* is not news, and repeats false accusations and claims made against Epiphany and me, and largely ignores the overwhelming evidence we have submitted to the Court,” the statement read.

“I am pleased that the Court has dismissed nearly every claim against me, my Foundation and Epiphany. Very importantly, the Court has dismissed all claims of discrimination or harassment against me. While there will be a trial on a few remaining issues, I am confident that a jury will evaluate these claims fairly and decide those claims in our favor as well. As we prepare for trial, I want to make one thing clear: Epiphany is and remains a place where students and faculty of any race, belief, religion, background or orientation should feel welcome. My commitment to these values, as well as Epiphany’s commitment to these values, have been and remain constant. At this time, we will not have any further comment. Thank you.”

Epiphany’s headmaster Dwight Carlblom declined to comment when reached by PEOPLE.

Emails Sparks fired off to Benjamin during his tenure, as obtained by *The Daily Beast*, show the author adamantly declaring he will not allow an LGBT club at the school, and defending his decision as one that isn't discriminatory.

"Not allowing them admittance is discrimination. Not allowing them to have a club is NOT discrimination," he wrote in November 2013. "Also, remember, we've had gay students before, many of them. [A former headmaster] handled it quietly and wonderfully, and the students considered themselves fortunate. I expect you to do the same."

In the same email, Sparks fought back against Benjamin's decision to incorporate sexual orientation into the school's non-discrimination policy, claiming he and the rest of the Board of Trustees were not on board.

"About the non-discrimination policy you keep bringing up: please remember that sexual orientation was NOT in there originally, and that the only reason it was added was that YOU insisted it specifically be added...," he wrote. "Frankly, no one but you wanted it in there, preferring to simply phrase it as 'we don't discriminate against... and other legally protected categories.' Please stop implying it was something the BOT wanted to do; it's the law."



Sparks also made it clear in his email that "protests" of any kind would not be allowed at the school, and thanked Benjamin for putting a stop to one that had been planned.

According to *The Daily Beast*, Sparks was referring to two LGBT students who told Benjamin they were going to stage a protest that involved them stripping off their clothes and painting their bodies to announce their orientation, though he allegedly told them not to.

The outlet also published a second email from Sparks to Benjamin that had been sent one day before, in which Sparks chastised the educator for “rocking the boat” with his “accepting” “agenda.”

“Understand that many people now perceive you as having an agenda with which they disagree. Again, you chose to rock this boat too early and hard, not only with Chapel changes, but with what some perceive as an agenda that strives to make homosexuality open and accepted,” he wrote.

Benjamin’s complaint also reportedly claims Sparks once said the school had few black students enrolled because they were “too poor and can’t do the academic work.”

In an email to Benjamin, the *A Walk to Remember* author reportedly wrote, “Regarding diversity, I’ve now told you half a dozen times that our lack of diversity has NOTHING to do with the school, or anyone at the school. It’s not because of what we as a school, has or hasn’t done. It has nothing to do with racism, or vestiges of Jim Crow. It comes down to 1) Money and 2) Culture.”

Benjamin’s lawsuit will reportedly head to trial in August.