

Best-selling novelist Nicholas Sparks under fire for reportedly trying to ban LGBTQ club at his Christian school

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Author Nicholas Sparks reportedly attempted to ban an LGBTQ club at his Christian school in New Bern, North Carolina.

What are the details?

According to a report from [the Daily Beast](#), Sparks — who opened the Epiphany School of Global Studies in 2006 — was caught sending emails quashing the notion of an LGBTQ club at the Christian school.

Sparks, who co-founded the New Bern-area prep school, has reportedly been involved in a legal battle with Saul Benjamin — the school's former headmaster and CEO — since 2014 over what the former headmaster describes as purported harassment, racism, and homophobia.

Benjamin's suit against Sparks also includes claims of defamation and is seeking punitive damages for discrimination, breach of contract, and emotional distress.

Benjamin, a Jewish-born Quaker, said that he was teaching at the Morocco-based university Al Akhawayn in 2013, when he received a call about a position at Sparks' school.

"I've always been an educator, always globally focused, always keenly interested in the ways that different cultures and different religions and different communities try to help young people discover their potential," Benjamin told the outlet. "That's not a speech, that's my faith."

He was interested in the job and began working for the school in 2013.

Immediately, he said, he noticed issues with the "school's attitude toward diversity," the outlet wrote.

One complaint obtained by the Daily Beast states, "Sparks and members of the Board unapologetically marginalized, bullied, and harassed members of the School community whose religious views and/or identities did not conform to their religiously driven, bigoted preconceptions."

Sparks is said to have rejected Benjamin's complaints.

The Daily Beast obtained emails purported to be between Sparks and other school officials that appear to show Sparks and company "repeatedly taking issue with Benjamin's attempts to make the school inclusive to all faiths, races, and sexualities."

One message allegedly written by Sparks blasted Benjamin for "what some perceive as an agenda that strives to make homosexuality open and accepted." In another, Sparks purportedly proposed a ban on a student protest at the school, which came on the heels of two lesbian students allegedly planning to "come out" during chapel. A third email reportedly from Sparks said Benjamin has "misplaced priorities at the school level (GLBT, diversity, the beauty of other religions, as opposed to academic/curricular/global issues, Christian traditions, etc)."

Benjamin also accused Sparks of spreading rumors questioning the headmaster's mental health.

One message purported to be from Sparks stated, "While I am not a doctor — and as scary as this may sound to you — I do believe that [Benjamin] is suffering from a mental illness of some sort. What that is — Alzheimer's, a variance of bi-polar, something else — I have no idea."

Benjamin said that when he attempted to improve relations with Sparks, he was rebuffed and ridiculed, which included allegations of racism.

Benjamin said that when he arrived at the school, its composition was "overwhelmingly white and Christian," according to the outlet, "with just two black students enrolled that year."

He also complained that after he began working at the school, he heard reports that students were attempting to open up a discussion about sexuality with teachers and that students had informally formed a peer group to discuss sex identities and orientations. Rumors reportedly began to swirl, which centered on an idea that Benjamin had formed a "gay club" within the school.

The Board of Trustees insisted at a meeting that the club be banned, according to the Daily Beast, and accused Benjamin of "promoting a homosexual culture and agenda" within the school.

A month after the board meeting, Benjamin said he heard rumblings of a student-led protest in which the two aforementioned lesbian students planned to paint themselves naked and announce their sexuality during chapel. Benjamin reportedly told the two girls that it was not appropriate and that it was "a time for healing, not heroics." During that week's chapel, Benjamin said he spoke out about bullying and loving your neighbors.

He claimed that his speech stirred up even more animosity.

In the following weeks, Benjamin and Sparks reportedly corresponded via email, and Sparks said that he was unhappy about the "diversity and tolerance" issues.

One portion of Sparks' alleged email said, "I told you this would happen ... if you didn't follow our advice, which was simply 'don't rock the boat on this particular issue.'" Sparks reportedly provided guidance on how Benjamin could get along better at the school, which included making sure "all Christian traditions feel especially Christian, especially as we move into the Christmas season."

The email continued, "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."

Sparks also purportedly defended the decision to strike down the LGBTQ club and insisted that "not allowing them to have a club is NOT discrimination."

"Remember, we've had gay students before, many of them," the email continued. "[The former headmaster] handled it quietly and wonderfully. ... I expect you to do the same."

Just days after the above-mentioned email, Sparks purportedly called Benjamin before a meeting with the school's Board of Trustees. Benjamin said that Sparks' behavior during the meeting was unbecoming of his position, acting in a "loud, ranting, and physically intimidating manner." During the meeting, Sparks also reportedly called Benjamin a liar and demanded he resign.

Benjamin did, in fact, resign, having only served in his position for a total of 98 days.

Sparks has denied all allegations and pointed to his perception that Benjamin was "aloof, even rude, elitist, and dismissive of ... beliefs or backgrounds." He also insisted that Benjamin was responsible for authorizing an official LGBTQ club, which was against policy.

The case is scheduled for a trial in August, according to the outlet.