

November 16, 2015

Dear Members of the Nova Classical Academy School Board and School Climate Committee:

We write to you as the parents of four children at Nova: Evan (6th grade), Marcos (4th grade), María (2nd grade), and Nicolás (1st grade). We also write as Christian parents who are troubled by the way our religion has been used to justify opposition to certain elements of Nova's anti-bullying program.

Our children understand that not everyone in the world shares our family's religious beliefs or values, but in addition to the foundations of their faith, we have taught them humility and respect for differing beliefs and opinions. A children's book with, at its core, a message of kindness and tolerance is not about to turn their moral world upside down – it will, in fact, reinforce some very fundamental spiritual values. We hope that when our children find their religious or moral values and beliefs challenged, whether in respectful debate or in the face of strident anti-religious bigotry, they will defend them with logic, clarity, courage and humility. In this they can draw inspiration from the noble examples of the Apostle Paul, St. Catherine of Alexandria, Martin Luther, St. Francis of Assisi, and countless other Christians who have defended their beliefs in both religious and secular arenas with courage and brilliance. That's what we send our children to Nova to learn how to do.

Nova's rigorous classical training in moral and intellectual excellence benefits immensely from the open and respectful exchange of ideas and opinions in an age-appropriate manner. Sadly, the School of Rhetoric loses many of the voices and opinions needed for vigorous and balanced examination and debate precisely at the moment when they are needed most, leaving all of our students poorer for their absence. If there is a perception among some members of our community that their values and beliefs are unwelcome, untolerated or somehow threatened by Nova's approach to cultivating moral and intellectual excellence, then those concerns should be respectfully addressed, but we as adults need to model an exchange of opinions that does not characterize ideological opponents as either immoral or bigoted.

That is a larger conversation, however, and one whose starting point needs to be the understanding that this is a public school that must respect and welcome people of all faith traditions, as well as those of no faith at all. The presence of beef or pork on the menu at Nova may offend the moral sensibilities of Hindu, Muslim, Jewish or vegan families, but it should not be viewed as an attack on religious liberty. If a family feels that the reading of *Green Eggs and Ham* at school will somehow undo years of moral instruction in the home, then they can exercise their right to opt out, but they are not allowed to impose their values on the rest of the community. To those who claim that the school is promoting a controversial pork-eating ideology or lifestyle, I would draw the distinction between acknowledging our students' right to personally embrace or reject these choices free from harassment and ridicule and the actual endorsement of them.

Some members of our school community believe that singling out gender nonconformity for a targeted anti-bullying message unfairly privileges one class of students over many other groups that may also be targets of bullying. This argument would carry greater weight if this were simply a theoretical discussion, but the fact is that we have a very real and immediate problem with the bullying of a gender-nonconforming child, one of the smallest and most vulnerable members of our school community. This demands a more vigorous and targeted response. We can assure you that if our children were the targets of racial, religious or anti-immigrant bullying – or were being regularly harassed by those who might have moral or ideological objections to their mother’s choice to work outside of the home – a sweet discussion of the challenges faced by a square pumpkin would not cut it for our family. The threshold for our school’s efforts to provide a safe learning environment for all of our students should not be set at the lowest possible level to simply be in compliance with our legal obligations. We can and must be better than that; we should do what is right and just and necessary to effectively address specific cases of bullying and ensure that all students are safe from ridicule and harassment.

Pope Francis himself has cautioned against the "closed hearts which frequently hide even behind the Church's teachings or good intentions, in order to sit in the chair of Moses and judge, sometimes with superiority and superficiality, difficult cases and wounded families." For our part, we will teach our children that their Christian duty is to respond to a vulnerable and suffering child and his family with kindness, mercy and love.

Respectfully,

Handwritten signatures of Tim Odegard and Marta Pereira. The signature for Tim Odegard is on the left, and the signature for Marta Pereira is on the right, both written in black ink.

Tim Odegard and Marta Pereira