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NEWS

'Professor Picky' under fire for comments about gender

By Elisha Meyer Kitsap News Group • September 29, 2023 1:30 am



<https://www.kitsapdailynews.com/news/professor-picky-under-fire-for-comments-about-gender/>



Elisha Meyer/Kitsap News Group The front entrance side of Brownsville Elementary School.

It started with a shared social media post by a Bremerton pastor, and in just the first few weeks back in classrooms, the Central Kitsap School District once again finds itself faced with another gender controversy and issue of student and staff safety.

Rick Vandenhole, a music teacher at Brownsville Elementary in Bremerton, faces harsh criticism and calls for resignation after a mid-September social media post he made caught the ire of some parents and community members.

The post, which has since been removed from public view on Facebook, recalls a conversation Vandenhole had with a kindergartener. The child, who refers to Vanderhole as “Professor Picky,” asks if the teacher is a boy or a girl. When asked why the child is not sure, the red shoes the teacher is wearing are pointed out by the child, who says, “Only girls wear red shoes.”

Vanderhole then said: “I don’t have to be a boy or a girl. I dress like me. And if someone thinks I dress like a girl, then I take that as a compliment because girls are awesome!” Vanderhole also posted a picture of himself in his teaching attire for the day, adding, “I’m literally wearing a dress with red fingernails, and he picks the shoes. LOL.”

The post was pushed into the spotlight by Coram Deo Church pastor Jon Needham just days later in a call for parents to pull their kids from the classroom and to not put up with what he called insanity. “Would you be concerned if a grown man dressed as a woman talked to your five-year-old child about gender? Well, meet Mr. Vandenhole,” Needham said.

More critics shared the screenshots, calling the post an insight into manipulative and self-serving behavior that took advantage of kids. The post even reached the notorious Libs of TikTok page, causing nationwide exposure.

Others came to the defense of Vanderhole, especially in the days following Brownsville’s Sept. 25 closure after a direct threat against the school involving a potential explosive. There wasn’t one. The district has not commented as to whether the threat was connected to the post.

“You threatened children because one man wanted to give a lesson in empathy,” Kevin Jones of Seattle said. “He wanted his students to understand others like a proper teacher should. Shame on you for endangering these children just so you can make a name for yourself in right-wing circles.”

A supporter of Vanderhole, Kristen Walker, a former CKSD teacher, remembers working with him, recalling how his work shaped both her and her son’s experience in

the district for the better. She remembered how her son was supported by Vanderhole and allowed to be himself with the teacher. "This teacher is someone who went above and beyond to put on the most amazing presentations and engagement in a time when kids were feeling so excluded," she said.

Calls to attend the district's Sept. 27 board meeting in response to the post and threat were supported for those on both sides of the issue. A restless crowd of moms, ministers and more geared up for public comment.

Needham was briefly in attendance and remained unapologetic about his message. Others agreed, with representatives from Moms for Liberty condemning the school threats but also attempting to call out the district for what they believe to be a specific agenda behind their inclusion policies. "It needs to be all students and all people, not just some," Ann Marie said.

Erik Randall, a teacher at Central Kitsap High School, quickly fired back, sharing his extreme distaste for the words being used against Vandenhole and others, especially what he called a dangerous loose usage of the term "groomer." "Even if the speaker is not calling for violence by name, it's the equivalent to yelling 'fire' in a theater, giving the green light to those who believe this slander to engage in extreme and violent acts," Randall said.

Rev. Gregory Reffner said he was shocked to see Christian leaders leading the charge against the teacher, one reason he supports the complete separation of church from state. "I am in favor of this separation because, for too long, Christians have enjoyed power and privileges in the public sphere that no other group has enjoyed," he said.

The meeting became a platform for discussion around student safety—multiple commenters brought up continued neglect toward members of the LGBTQ+ community. Others discussed how kids are still refusing to go to the bathroom on school grounds for fear of being assaulted.

That contributed to tempers flaring even among board members in the meeting's final minutes after director Eric Greene called out the board for an apparent aversion to addressing the community's concerns about safety. "As a board, we never talk about it," he said. "This is exactly how we avoid the issue every time because it's gotta be on the agenda. Put it on the agenda for the next meeting please, and when it's not on the agenda, I'll ask you why you blew me off again."