

School Board member says classroom comments violated policy

Circumstances of instructor's 'We're all Trumpers here' remark during talk by former campaign staffer disputed

BY BEN PETERS

Rappahannock News staff

The appearance of a guest speaker in a Rappahannock County High School classroom has forced a teacher to apologize for comments he made that caused a dispute within the school system.

An instructor at the high school in March was accused by a member of the School Board of violating school policy after inviting a senior staffer with former President Donald Trump's reelection campaign to speak before an eighth-grade class where the staffer was said to have given a politicized talk.

The teacher, John Krob, a long-term substitute who teaches world cultures, invited former Trump campaign Director of Social Media Mike

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to speak with the class virtually on March 18 about political campaigns and how the former president's re-election campaign leveraged digital media to its advantage.

Piedmont School Board member Rachel Bynum later accused Krob of violating school policy since she was told by several people anonymously that during the event Krob said in front of the class: "We're all Trumpers here." A person present during the presentation in Krob's class, who requested to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation, said in an interview they heard the remark.

Krob said in an interview he made the comment to Hahn, not the students, in an effort to make him feel more welcome in the classroom since he was speaking to an audience in an area that historically supports Republicans. "It was made in jest in the sense that ... you know, you're OK in this neighborhood. It's like going to church or something and somebody says, 'Hey, you know everybody is a friend here.' And that was it," he said.

Superintendent Dr. Shannon Grimsley said her investigation into the matter found that Krob, through his remark, meant to imply that he merely observed students in the classroom were excited to ask Hahn questions about the former president's campaign. Hahn, who is now the deputy digital director of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, was not able to be reached for comment.

Krob, who also works for the international pro-democracy Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), was asked to apologize to the class following the incident and expressed remorse, according to Grimsley.

"I understand there's some people that may have been disturbed by the comment that I made ... and I apologize for that — not because I feel bad about it. It's that maybe I shouldn't have said it in the classroom," Krob said he told the class. Grimsley declined to say whether he faces any consequences within the school or whether he violated school policy, noting she is unable to discuss personnel matters.

Information surrounding Hahn's visit, which was authorized by Rappahannock County High School Principal Carlos Seward, and Krob's comments were anonymously shared with Bynum by several people. Bynum alleged in an interview that both were in violation of school policy that prohibits "indoctrination in any particular religious or political belief."

"An instructor claiming that everybody is in agreement about a particular candidate isn't part of what you do at a public school," she said in an interview. "... We want everybody to feel comfortable at our school. We're a public school and need to be welcoming to a variety of views."

The School Board member took her concerns to Grimsley, who met with Krob and declared that school

DR. SHANNON GRIMSLEY:
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administration will be attending future speaker events teachers hold, according to Bynum. Grimsley would not verify whether administrators will supervise future guest speakers' presentations, saying again she is unable to comment on issues related to personnel. Krob said he canceled the remaining guest speaker events in his class for the academic year.

Krob's class is known for bringing in a diverse array of speakers from across the globe, including a Russian ambassador and a human rights advocate with the United Nations, which Grimsley said illustrates the schools' commitment to presenting varied viewpoints.

According to the person present for the talk, Hahn said during his virtual presentation to the class that the American Rescue Plan, a sweeping COVID-19 relief act passed by the House of Representatives and Senate and signed by President Joe Biden, was a disaster for the economy. Democratic presidents often oversee and are responsible for inflationary times, Hahn allegedly said.

Krob, who said he's friendly with Hahn's father and has known the former Trump campaign staffer for years, denied that Hahn made any partisan claims when speaking before the class.

"[Hahn's presentation] wasn't out of place. It is part of the larger context of how all of these people have roles in modern day events and how it fits their interests," Grimsley said. However, she noted the instructor's comments to the class were "not appropriate."

Grimsley said that Krob made clear at the start of class that each speaker that comes before them has their own opinions and worldviews that don't necessarily reflect those of the school or himself, and that students are given the option to not participate in the class should they feel uncomfortable.

Krob emphasized that Bynum's allegation offended him, saying that the purpose of his class is to expose students to contemporary politics and religion. "I don't indoctrinate anybody," he said.

Grimsley added, "We are committed to making sure our schools are nonpartisan. Partisanship doesn't have a place — especially with coercive authority that teachers employ ... so [it] is not appropriate to make any type of comments that may be for one way or another."

The incident marks the second time in this academic year that a political figure was invited by a teacher to speak with a high school class and gave a polarizing presentation to students that inflamed some on the left.

U.S. Rep. Bob Good (R-5th District) during a visit in October encouraged a class to rise up in opposition to COVID-19 mitigation measures such as masking, while also spreading other pieces of misinformation and baselessly accusing Democrats of lying about the effectiveness of vaccines.

It also came as Republicans in Virginia and across the nation take aim at what they claim to be politically or ideologically motivated material taught in schools, with Gov. Glenn Youngkin creating an anonymous tip line for parents to report what they view as "divisive concepts" cropping up in classrooms. Grimsley has spoken out against Youngkin's tip line in the past.

School Board Chair Wes Mills, of Jackson District, said in an email he was made aware of the incident involving Krob and that the administration is "on top of this situation."

"The class is 'World Cultures' and therefore entertains diverse speakers with the intention to give students real-world experience with world dynamics. Mr. Krob has facilitated many of these types of sessions which are of great value to the students," he said.

Mills continued, "[Krob] prefaced the sessions with a general statement that the world views presented are not those of the school but are important for us to consider as we try to understand the world we live in ... Understanding other cultures (religious, political, geographical, ...) and current events is a helpful building block within education ... Sadly, I believe the aforementioned event has stifled the students' exposure to an ongoing variety of world views."

Stonewall-Hawthorne School Board member Larry Grove said that he wasn't consulted by Grimsley or anybody else in school administration about the incident, only hearing about it third-hand. Lucy Maeyer, of Hampton District, did not return a request for comment.

School Board member Chris Ubben, of Wakefield District, said he had heard of the incident and was "dismayed" with what he termed private personnel matters having been made public.

"That is disappointing and frankly disgraceful that our staff cannot trust in our leadership to conduct themselves in the manner they insist that staff should," Ubben said in an email. "I will not pretend to or attempt to position myself to make a personal statement at this time as I do not speak for the whole Board and no individual member of the School Board should be doing so at this time."

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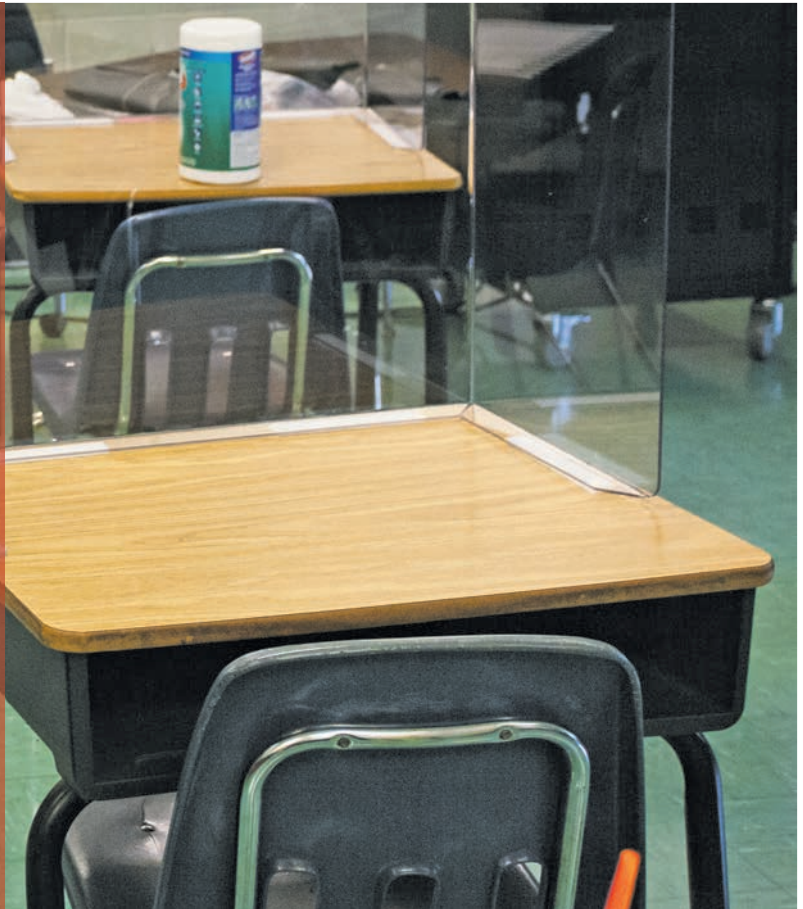
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25%

of Rapp
Elementary
students
were
chronically
absent last
year, per
state report



FILE PHOTO BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER

A state accreditation report shows that RCES was flagged for being below the state's standards for chronic absenteeism rates during the 2021-2022 school year.

Officials feel school is being punished for encouraging students who may be sick to stay home

BY BEN PETERS
Rappahannock News staff

One in four students at Rappahannock County Elementary School last year were deemed chronically absent by the Virginia Department of Education (VDE) in what administrators described as a pandemic consequence that negatively impacted the school's state accreditation evaluation.

An accreditation report shows that the school was flagged this year for being below the state's standards for chronic absenteeism rates during the 2021-2022 school year. Chronic absenteeism includes excused and unexcused absences and counts when a student misses school for 10% of the year, or about 18 days. It's different from truancy, which occurs when a student accrues unexcused absences and a parent doesn't acknowledge their child missing school.

The elementary school last year saw a 13% increase in its chronic absenteeism rate from the 2020-2021 school year, according to the report. In

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the past two years, the state has waived accreditation standards for schools, but this year evaluations resumed. Still, chronic absenteeism is the only accreditation maker where the school fell short of state standards this year.

Prior to the pandemic, the school was much more strict about following up with parents when students missed consecutive days of school, according to Principal Lisa Gates. At the height of the health emergency, they relaxed those efforts since many students were learning remotely or were unable to visit a medical provider to receive a doctor's note. Gates and her staff found that last year students and parents became more lax with attendance since the school had become so lenient in monitoring absenteeism amid the pandemic.

"We just kind of trusted their word and provided remote instruction" when students were absent, she said.

But last year, when remote learning became nearly nonexistent, many parents and students didn't adapt to the school's attendance policies, Gates said. "Parents are responsible for making sure their kids come to school, no matter the age," she said.

Some students found to be chronically absent reported to administrators that they stayed home to run errands with their family or that they were given a choice by their parents about whether to attend school, according to the principal. Some parents, she said, may also have become more comfortable with their child doing work from home since that became the norm during the pandemic's initial surges. Other students were said to be legitimately sick for extended periods of time.

Most of those who were quarantined with COVID-19 or from exposure to the virus completed assignments remotely and were not marked absent. But others who were absent for any number of reasons did not complete work, fell behind academically and received poor marks on their report cards.

"We found that it was a big problem last year because we had so many students that were missing school that maybe they were so sick they weren't able to work remotely and so they were just falling more and more behind," Gates said.

The school ended up holding a spring remediation session to help students catch up and gave deadline extensions for assignments. "Sometimes students got so far behind that they were just super stressed out and then they didn't want to do anything and they felt like they were just drowning in work," she said.

Despite many students falling behind, the school still met all state standards for academic achievement as the pandemic wears on, frustrating some administrators who believe that the institution is being unfairly reprimanded for chronic absenteeism.

Both Executive Director of Student Support Services Mike Tupper, who oversees absenteeism and truancy, and Superintendent Dr. Shannon Grimsley indicated they feel that the school is being punished for encouraging students who may be sick to stay home while COVID-19 and other other viruses continue to circulate. Tupper pointed to a high school in Stafford County where more than 1,000 students were absent

last week following what is believed to be an influenza surge.

"The 'problem' is not that we have many students who are chronically absent, but rather the state continuing to use chronic absenteeism as an indicator for accreditation, especially since we have not yet officially exited pandemic status, and we are still promoting good health practices acquired during the pandemic," Grimsley said in an email. "If academic indicators are met, and no direct correlation exists at a locality between academic achievement and absenteeism rates, perhaps this indicator might continue to be waived?"

She continued: "There is no intention to waive chronic absenteeism as an accreditation indicator this year, which is concerning as we have worked hard to promote staying home when sick. [Gates] is working proactively to prevent chronic absenteeism from becoming an issue while also promoting completion of work to earn credit. We do not anticipate that this will be a major issue this year since we do not have so many restrictions due to COVID."

PRINCIPAL LISA GATES:

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High chronic absenteeism rates isn't an issue unique to Rappahannock. Elementary schools in neighboring Warren and Culpeper counties were also flagged by the state this year, according to VDE. If a school falls behind on accreditation markers for several consecutive years, the state sends officials to help remedy the issue.

In Rappahannock, Gates is working to come up with creative solutions to help incentivize students to come to school. One idea is to award a pizza party with the principal to the grade levels with the highest attendance rates. Last year the higher grade levels at the K-7 elementary school often included the most chronically absent students, she said.

In the current school year administrators said attendance rates have so far seen a marked improvement. Tupper said most parents are calling to report when their child is sick.

"We're where we need to be academically," Gates said. "So, to me, even though we're at level 2 for chronic absenteeism, it has not affected our accreditation academically. So, I don't feel like it is a problem, but we don't want it to become a problem."

She continued: "I feel like this year is going much smoother than the years prior and I feel like everybody is doing their part and parents are doing their part — keeping their kids home when they need to and sending them to school when they're well ... we're just trying to make school a positive experience so they enjoy it and are learning, because it's been a while since we've been able to do that for kids."

Training ag's next gen



BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER

Students grind horseshoes for their sculpture projects at the academy, which has expanded beyond its veterinary science origins.

The high school's Agricultural Academy is exploding in popularity, part of a push to expand trades and arts education

BY BEN PETERS
Rappahannock News staff

The Rappahannock County High Schools' Agricultural Academy program that trains students for both blue and white collar work in the industry has exploded in popularity since its inception two years ago.

Michele Fincham and Rich Hogan, teachers who oversee the program that supplements students' traditional academic curriculum, predict that upward of a third of the schools' total student population are involved.

The academy allows students to enroll in one of two tracks, each providing an opportunity to earn up to a few workforce certifications. The first track places students on the path of becoming veterinarians through education in animal sciences, while working closely with Dr. Tom Massie of Rose Hill Veterinary Clinic. The other sets students on course to enter the workforce following graduation as technical farm hands after completing classes on welding and small engine repairs, among others.

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For many of the students in the program, it could provide an alternative to college, which isn't for everybody, Superintendent Dr. Shannon Grimsley said. "The interesting thing that I think is awesome about the ag academy is it's really engaged a part of our community that I feel like wasn't engaged before too much with the school division," she said.

When the academy first started in 2020, it was primarily focused on veterinary science and led by Fincham. But her professional relationship grew with Hogan, who shares a hallway with her, and he helped expand the program with agricultural trades outside her area of expertise. Their respective domains of study synergized to create what the academy is today, and organizers have plans to expand it further in the years to come.

Adjacent to the academy is the schools' Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapter, a student organization focused on service in the agricultural community. Being in the academy isn't required to join FFA, but there is a great deal of overlap between the two. Rappahannock's chapter, sponsored by Fincham, has grown in size significantly since starting just a few years ago following an intense recruitment effort. Its members can be found purchasing Christmas gifts for families in need or serving local farmers at breakfast events.

Many of the students involved in the academy and FFA don't come from agriculture or farming backgrounds, Fincham said. But those who do bare a strong personal connection with the land and agricultural sciences within the Rappahannock community, according to high school Principal Carlos Seward, who helps Fincham and Hogan facilitate the programs.

"You can see the excitement in the kids ... [I] just haven't seen them light up like this before, and coming off the heels of COVID, that's what we want to see — to re-engage them in their learning," Grimsley said. "These types of programs are great for that."

Senior Olivia Gibson, the school's FFA president who's planning to attend Virginia Tech to study animal science and become an agriculture teacher, said many students join FFA and enroll in the academy in search of school involvement and community.

"You can be interested in animals, you can be interested in public speaking, you can be interested in plants — pretty much anything and just have a place there," she said. "It's just very inclusive to everyone I think, and it doesn't really matter what your background is. There's something for you in it."

Fincham said that students also respond well to her and Hogan, as many take several classes and build meaningful relationships with them throughout their high school careers.

"We really build relationships with each one of our students. We care about them on a more personal level. Especially in high school, they need that type of mentorship," Fincham said. "And I think that's what really helps build our classes up is that bond, and at the same time, the amount of



PHOTOS BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER

Michele Fincham instructs Olivia Gibson, a senior going to Virginia Tech next year, how to administer blood drawing through various venipuncture sites in her Veterinary Science 2 class.

hands-on and industry experience they're gaining."

The academy is part of a broader initiative at the schools to invest in trades and arts with the Career and Technical Education (CTE) program, which includes the Health Sciences Academy, a partnership with Rapp Center for Education. The schools hope to launch next year a fine arts academy and trade academy that would be in partnership with

Lord Fairfax Community College, according to Grimsley.

CTE received acclaim from the Alexandria-based National School Boards Association, which came to Rappahannock in February to report a feature story on the program. Fincham was invited to travel to San Diego on Friday and meet with the association about the agriculture academy, which caught their attention.

"These career and technical education programs now do two things," Seward said. "One, they honor the spirit of work and they fill those blue collar jobs that local, state and national studies show we don't have enough of."

But Piedmont District School Board member Rachel Bynum, also a co-proprietor of Sperryville's Waterpenny Farm, would like to see the agriculture academy broadened to prepare students for a wider array of careers in farming, and potentially expand its focus toward nurturing a stronger local food economy rather than investing most resources into training for commodity farming.

"When you look at the farms that are featured on the Rappahannock Farm Tour, for example, those farms and our farm are not very much represented in the current ag academy," she said.

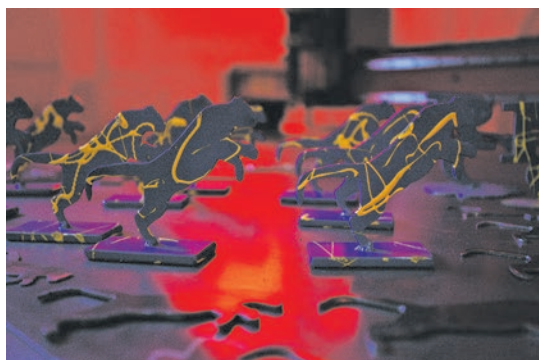
Bynum also suggested the schools should place a larger emphasis on teaching the next generation of farmers to preserve their mental health and quality of life as hundreds in the industry have died by suicide in recent years after struggling to keep up with debt and other demands of agricultural life, such as isolation.

Expansions to the program she said could include entrepreneurship education, like marketing and money management, to help local farms be more economically sustainable. The schools have plans to coordinate with the business department to provide students an opportunity to gain those skills within the context for farming, Seward said.

Also in the works, according to the principal, is exploring vinticity training where students could learn to manage and maintain vineyards and wineries, a large and still growing agritourism industry in Rappahannock and the Piedmont region. There are also plans to build an aquaculture lab for students to learn fish cultivation.



Junior Nessa Frazier shows her sculpture made from horseshoes in Rich Hogan's Welding 1 class.



Students used a computer guided cutter to make Panther logo sculptures.