

IW School Board won't remove iPad apps

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Isle of Wight County's School Board has declined to remove two programs from school-issued iPads, which at least one parent says provide "dangerous and sensitive material" to children.

Candice Vande Brake, the mother of a Windsor Elementary School kindergartner, started the process outlined in School Board Policy KLB several months ago for challenging books and other learning resources — in this case, the eMediaVA and Discovery Education apps.

When a committee consisting of Windsor Elementary's principal, media specialist, a classroom teacher and a reading coach voted to continue using the challenged apps, Vande Brake appealed to the school system's central office, which upheld the committee's decision. She made her final appeal to the School Board on March 30.

In eMediaVA, she said, she found a news article titled "Police shooting of Louisiana man sparks outrage" and a children's book titled "Max and the Talent Show," which features a transgender character. She also found an article titled "Should teens be able to get a vaccine without parental consent?" and one where students could "learn about the influence of the communist values of organization, discipline and collectivism."

In Discovery Education, she said, she found articles on "sex, gender identity and implicit bias," as well as "HIV/AIDS: staying safe" and "LGBTQ rights."

Vande Brake described the material as "fostering mindsets that could contribute to diminished family and religious values."

"We have appealed, appealed and now we're appealing a third time ... in an attempt to better the school system for all children and protect our child's innocence," Vande Brake said.

When questioned by the School Board, Vande Brake said the school system had already approved her request to remove the apps from her own child's iPad, but she was now "representing a number of parents" and was seeking to have the apps removed from every iPad issued to Isle of Wight County Schools' 5,500-plus students.

"What number of parents?" School Board Chairwoman Denise Tynes asked.

"I would probably say 75% of the community," Vande Brake replied.

"Without having the correct filters on there ... I think the best thing is to take it off all the iPads,"

Vande Brake said. "You could send your kid and say, 'Hey, go play with your school-issued device in your room for 10 minutes ... and the next thing you know your son, daughter, could come out and be asking you sex questions, and you're just not ready to deal with it at five years old or on a Wednesday night when you worked a 12-hour shift.'"

Tynes, however, asked for proof that Vande Brake was indeed speaking for 75% of Isle of Wight's parents, and argued it was indeed parents' responsibility, and not the school system's, to monitor their children's use of school-issued devices when they take them home.

"When that child is at home with you, you're responsible for what they retrieve," Tynes said.

"We can only control our own households," board member Michael Vines agreed.

The "Max and the Talent Show" story about the transgender boy "offended me," Vines added. "I don't want my grandkids, you know, being led down that road ... I am in complete agreement with you that these items should be removed, but it begins at home."

As for the sexual content Vande Brake found, "No parent in their right mind is going to walk up behind their child and see their child looking at pornographic material and let them continue," Vines added. "You're going to stop them. Am I right?"

However, board member Renee Dial, a physician assistant, said she didn't consider it "pornographic" for children to learn the correct names for their body parts.

"I'm OK and comfortable with discussing anatomy with my children because of my background," Dial said. "I prefer them to know exactly what it's called and not anything other than that, but that's me personally, and I don't want that choice to be taken from me."

The eMediaVA app is developed by WHRO, a Hampton Roads public broadcasting station owned by a collaboration of 21 public school divisions. According to Susan Goetz, Isle of Wight County Schools' executive director of leadership, it curates digital content from a variety of sources, including PBS, Colonial Williamsburg, NASA and the Smithsonian. Discovery Education, she said, is very similar but was developed on a national scale, and therefore has content beyond Virginia's standards of learning.

"When we went into shutdown in March 2020, we very quickly realized we needed more digital content," Goetz said.

The apps, she said, are particularly useful for when teachers need to work individually with students struggling in a particular subject. WHRO is already working on a change to its eMediaVA app that will limit access to content at their grade level.

"This is a change that is going to be in the new update, which should launch in May or June," Goetz said. "This is a direct result of us asking them to put better filters in place."

Discovery Education, she added, has already put some filters in place, and has the ability to restrict content by grade level.

"These companies are responding, they're listening and they're attempting to put these filters in place like we've asked them to," Goetz said.

The School Board ultimately voted 3-1 to deny Vande Brake's request that the apps be removed divisionwide. Board member John Collick cast the dissenting vote.

"We've got a lot in there that we're giving to our kids that probably don't belong in schools ... I'm taken aback by searching 'police' and they come up with all this negative stuff for younger kids," Collick said. "Now, in high school they can talk about current events and stuff, but younger children should know that when they're in a crowd and they get lost, go to a police officer. He's going to help you find Mom and Dad."

Vines, however, said he'd changed his mind following Goetz's remarks, and joined Tynes and Dial in opposing the apps' removal.

"You can't just throw the baby out with the bathwater," Vines said.

"If we block Clever, we're blocking Google"

The School Board then heard another appeal for the removal of certain apps, this time from Heidi Swartz, the mother of a Smithfield High School student. Her appeal, according to the meeting's agenda, concerned TED-Ed, Discovery Education and MackinVIA.

TEDEd, according to IWCS spokeswoman Lynn Briggs, provides access to educationally relevant TED talks and highlights the ideas of teachers and students around the world. TED, according to its website, is a nonprofit devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short recordings of speakers talking about particular issues.

MackinVIA, Briggs said, is a digital library that provides students and teachers with access to books and scholarly resources via the internet for research purposes.

All of the apps are available via a student's "Clev-

er" account, which Briggs described as a "launching pad" where students can log in and access digital content available to them through the school system.

Swartz, however, argued her request went beyond the three apps listed on the agenda.

"I was appealing everything on Clever ... even the 'Read Woke' challenge," Swartz said.

The "Read Woke" challenge, which began in 2020 and was reprised in 2021, encourages students to voluntarily read social justice-themed books available at Smithfield High School's library. Last year, a number of parents took issue with the challenge, some for the sexual content in some of the books, and others who argued the books' focus on race relations was "divisive."

"Clever is different for every single teacher in our school division," said Superintendent Dr. Jim Thornton.

"One of the apps on Clever, you might want to know, is Google, so if we block Clever, we're blocking Google," said Eric Coopridier, the division's director of information technology.

Swartz then asked to reschedule her hearing.

'Partisan or doctrinal disapproval'

Following the conclusion of the two scheduled hearings, the School Board took a first look at proposed changes to the KLB policy Vande Brake and Swartz had used.

The proposed changes now explicitly states materials "shall not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval."

"The purpose of revising the policy was to actually provide more details and guidelines for

the process," Goetz said. "This policy has been in existence for many years. This is the first time we've ever actually gone through the entire process from the beginning to where we are tonight."

"I demand it be removed from tonight's agenda," Collick had stated at the start of the meeting, citing another School Board policy — BDB — which requires the board "unanimously agree" before considering any business that does not come within a special meeting's purpose.

"Madam chair, this special meeting is to hear an appeal, not to consider policy," Collick said. "Policy is part of the regular business of the school board and should be treated as such ... This proposed policy could impact parents' abilities to appeal the very topics we are hearing and considering this evening.

... I demand it be removed from tonight's agenda."

The public notice the school system had published to advertise the special meeting had listed only one purpose: "appeal of learning resources." But according to Thornton, revisions to the appeal policy had been "on the agenda since day one, so Policy BDB does not apply."

"I disagree with the superintendent vehemently," Collick replied.

Tynes made no response to Collick's remarks other than to call for the question regarding a motion already on the table to approve the agenda as-is, which Vines had made and Dial had seconded. The motion passed 3-1 with Collick voting "nay."

The revised KLB policy will go before the board for a second read and a vote at a future meeting.

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Vines investigation continues despite recall failure

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

The Suffolk Commonwealth's Attorney's Office appears to be continuing its investigation of Isle of Wight County School Board member Michael Vines, despite a judge's dismissal of the recall petition that had sought to oust him from his seat.

The petition, which county resident Lewis Edmonds filed in March, had sought Vines' "immediate suspension," accusing him of having made "wildly inappropriate" remarks at recent meetings, and of "malfeasance" for having left his employment status and salary blank on the required statement of economic interests school board members must file.

Circuit Court Judge Carl Eason dismissed the petition on March 29 after finding

that none of the more than 200 county residents who signed it had attested to having done so under penalty of perjury as required under state law.

The court had named Suffolk Commonwealth's Attorney Nerendra Pleas as a special prosecutor for the recall after Isle of Wight Commonwealth's Attorney Georgette Phillips recused herself and her office, citing an unspecified conflict. Pleas then tasked Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Lily Wilder with arguing in favor of the petition at the March 29 hearing.

A day later, on March 30, the Isle of Wight County Sheriff's Office served Isle of Wight County Schools with a search warrant for an unredacted version of Vines' statement of economic interests.

According to IWCS

spokeswoman Lynn Briggs, state law requires copies of school board members' statements of economic interests to have each board member's addresses and signatures redacted.

"We told the assistant CA that we would work with them but we were bound by law," Briggs said.

The search warrant, which The Smithfield Times obtained from the Isle of Wight County Circuit Court Clerk's Office, accuses Vines of "stating that he does not make over \$5,000 at his place of employment" by virtue of having left the employment status and salary blank on the statement of economic interests form, but having stated at a Feb. 8 town hall meeting that he was "an IT manager" who makes "over \$100,000 a year." Edmonds had made the same accusation in his dismissed

petition.

An accompanying affidavit characterizes Vines' omission as "forging public records," a Class 4 felony under Virginia law. The affidavit is signed by Sheriff's Office Sgt. Kris Coughlin, who attests to having "personal knowledge of the facts set forth" in it.

Capt. Tommy Potter, a spokesman for the Sheriff's Office, declined to comment on the investigation and deferred to Pleas, who also declined to comment.

Phillips also declined to comment on what she referred to as an "ongoing investigation."

Steven M. Oser, the attorney who represented Vines at the recall hearing, declined to comment on the search warrant and affidavit. Vines himself has not return a request for comments.



Student director Mary Shelor marches the Smithfield High School band back inside after practice.

Marching on

Student directors instrumental in band leadership transition

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Since the departure of former Smithfield High School band director Joel Joyner last school year, 17-year-old senior Mary Shelor has been doing what she can to provide a sense of normalcy for her fellow band members.

On Mondays after school, the piccolo player and flutist-turned-director can be found either in the school's band room or leading practice at Smithfield High's football field. On this particular Monday, Sept. 26, it's the latter.

Joyner, a retired Army sergeant major who'd led the band since 2014, had begun training Shelor as a student director prior to taking medical leave in March and retiring at the end of the last school year.

Shelor, who's been playing with the band since seventh grade, said she received word in June, just three days prior to Smithfield High's graduation commencement, that she'd been appointed to fill in as the band's director for the ceremony.

"It was intimidating. ... It was kind of spur of the moment," Shelor said, speaking to *The Smithfield Times* at the Sept. 26 band practice.

But week after week since then, she's risen to the challenge of her new role, figuratively and literally, ascending the steps of a portable director's podium on the football field.

"Band, attention!" she commands.

"Smithfield!" the band shouts in response, instruments at the ready, each student standing where he or she would be positioned if playing at halftime during a football game.

"Instruments up!" Shelor orders.

"Packers!" the band responds in unison.

Shelor begins counting, "One. Two. One. Two. Ready. Play!"

On cue, the band begins to play "The Star Spangled Banner," followed by Michael Jackson's "Beat It" and "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough."

Shelor isn't the only one to find herself in a new leadership role this school year. Sept. 26 was also Stephen Syrell's first day on the job as Smithfield High's new band director.

Prior to his reassignment, Syrell had served in the same role at Westside Elementary School for eight years. Many of Smithfield High's current band members started with him at Westside.

Before Syrell's arrival, Shelor and junior Alex Muir, who plays the clarinet and tenor saxophone, had been working together to tutor their fellow band members during the school day.

From March through Sept. 23, Smithfield High had employed a long-term substitute for the band room who, in Shelor's words, was "more of a proctor."

"I've had to lead the band classes," Shelor said.

Since the start of the current school year, she'd been essentially teaching Smithfield High's third block symphonic course, with Muir doing the same for the second block jazz.

Syrell told the *Times* it's always been his aspiration to be a high school band director.

"Being with an advanced group, you get to do a lot more with artistic expression," he said.

Still, he misses watching his current Westside students progress from being nervous to even hold an instrument to being confident enough to perform with a group. He hopes to still find the time to do concerts with them.

Having student directors like Shelor and Muir has been a welcome change.

"It takes a lot of responsibility off my shoulders," Syrell said.

According to Isle of Wight County Schools spokeswoman Lynn Briggs, the school system had hired someone over the summer to replace Joyner, but that person ended up resigning before the start of the school year. As of Sept. 8, the school system was still advertising the position.



Mary Shelor, standing on a portable conductor's podium, directs band members during halftime show practice.



Brooke Parker performs with her baton as the band plays.



Elaine Berman plays her trumpet on the 45-yard line.

Marching

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“Many applicants were already under contract and couldn’t get released,” Briggs said.

Isle of Wight County Schools participates in an agreement with area school divisions not to hire staff from one another after June 30.

According to Sean Venson, president of the Smithfield High School Band Boosters, the long-term substitute who had been assigned to Smithfield High is now filling in for Syrell at Westside. The Band Boosters are a group of parents and supporters who advocate and raise funds for the band.

Isle, speaking to the Times by phone Sept. 26, said he was allowed to sit in on some of the interviews.

Some candidates from larger school systems, he recalled, cited pay as their reason for declining a contract with Isle of Wight.

Isle of Wight actually offers higher supplemental pay for high school band directors than the significantly larger Virginia Beach school system, with Isle of Wight paying an extra \$5,500 for the Smithfield High job compared to Virginia Beach’s \$3,600 stipend. But Virginia Beach offers higher base pay, ranging from a minimum of \$51,695 for entry-level teaching contracts to a minimum of just over \$90,000 for teachers with 43 or more years of experience. Isle of Wight, by comparison, offers a \$47,277 minimum salary and uses a 35-step scale that stops paying annual raises once a teacher with 35 or more years of experience reaches a base salary of \$80,580.

Venson also recalled that “word had got out about Mr. Joyner.”

‘A big slap in the face’

Joyner, speaking to The Smithfield Times by phone on Sept. 26, confirmed he had taken medical leave in mid-March for surgery related to his military-related disability, but contended his ultimate departure from the school system was less than amicable.

When Joyner tried to return to the school later that month to pick up some

paperwork from his office, he – in his words – was “thrown out of the building” in front of one of his classes.

“The (substitute) was standing there, the kids in my first block were standing there. ... It was a big slap in the face,” Joyner said.

After the alleged incident, Joyner said he decided to distance himself from the school, ultimately choosing to put in for retirement at the end of the last school year.

Joyner, however, said he returned to Smithfield High on July 1, the day band camp was supposed to start, after receiving word from parents that no band director had shown up.

“I was in the band room on the conductor’s podium,” Joyner said, where again in front of the students, school officials allegedly told him he “would have to leave immediately.”

He then said he’d offered in writing to serve as the band’s long-term substitute for the start of the 2022-23 school year until a new director could be found, but was “denied and was told to call (Human Resources Director Laura) Sullivan.”

“I never did call Ms. Sullivan ... I don’t know what happened that caused them to treat me that way,” Joyner said.

Briggs, asked about Joyner’s allegations, said she couldn’t “speak to specific personnel matters.” She did, however, assert the division’s administration had “no knowledge of any of these events.”

If Joyner’s account is indeed accurate, it would be the second consecutive time that Smithfield High’s band director has had a falling out with the school division administration.

Joyner succeeded Aaron Hill, also a military veteran, as the school’s band director in August 2014. Three months earlier, Hill had publicly announced his resignation at a band event in Smithfield High’s auditorium, describing his tenure in the role as “nothing but a battle,” according to the Times’ archives.

Hill’s announcement, according to past reporting by the Times, was met with cries of “fight!” and “We love you!” from the audi-

ence, though Hill said he would “take the high road” rather than what he termed “civil disobedience.” Hill was credited during his tenure with more than doubling the band’s membership from 105 students in 2008 to 247 when he left.

According to the Times’ 2014 reporting, the school system’s administration at the time had cut band funding and threatened to prevent overnight trips to performances, resulting in the band almost not making it to the National Cherry Blossom Parade in Washington, D.C., that year.

Drumsticks ‘taped together’

At the School Board’s Sept. 8 meeting, four parents and two students spoke during a public hearing on proposed changes to the school system’s five-year capital improvements plan – advocating for a proposed renovation of Smithfield High’s band and chorus facilities slated for the 2026-27 school year to happen sooner.

“We need you, the board, and you, our new superintendent, to approve funding for this program now, not in 2026,” said SHS parent and Band Booster Tiffany Walker.

Walker contends students are “using damaged instruments,” including “drumsticks that are taped together because they have been broken from so many students using them over the years.”

Holding up two pieces of torn fabric at the lectern, she added that “padding for the drums” is “falling apart and being held together by rubber bands, and in some cases, being duct-taped together just so the metal won’t cut into our students’ shoulders.”

As of November 2020, renovating the school’s band and chorus areas was projected to cost \$2 million to \$2.4 million, according to past reporting by the Times. The plan, at that time, was to knock down the wall between the band and chorus rooms to give the band more space, and to move the chorus to an area being used as an art classroom.

According to Briggs, \$1.3

million was proposed last year for band and chorus renovations as part of the five-year capital improvements plan, with the renovations slated to occur during the 2025-26 school year. The final approved plan from the county currently has it listed for 2026-27.

Venson, speaking to the Times on Sept. 26, said the current band room should have a capacity of 85 students, but currently, “you can really only sit 25 to 30 kids without really being on top of each other.”

Part of the issue, Venson said, stems from when Liberty Live Church began using Smithfield High to hold worship services on Sundays three years ago, displacing some of the band’s storage space. Liberty Live is in the process of relocating from the high school to its own building, which the congregation plans to build off a cul-de-sac on Wimbledon Lane.

At the Sept. 8 public hearing, several parents contended the band room’s air conditioning worked only intermittently. The air is now fixed, according to Venson, but the instrument closet door “is warped and doesn’t lock.”

“There are instruments that need to be repaired,” he added, “mostly on the percussion” side.

“A lot of our stuff is damaged,” Muir confirmed.

