

GP school board to tackle video pushing back on transgender rights
By Natalie Skowlund of the Daily Courier

A video posted on Youtube in which a Grants Pass middle school administrator and a teacher push back on transgender student rights will likely be on the agenda of the upcoming Grants Pass School Board meeting Tuesday.

Whether the video and its ensuing controversy will be discussed publicly in open session or behind closed doors in executive session is not yet clear, according to board member Brian DeLaGrange, given that the two educators featured in the video have been put on administrative leave while the district conducts what it has described as an investigation.

The video seemingly went viral Tuesday or Wednesday, but school board chairman Scott Nelson said he was first made aware of it two weeks ago during spring break and that a district investigation began sometime last week.

Nelson said that the investigation of Assistant Principal Rachel Damiano and science teacher Katie Medart is probably focused on whether their involvement in the video violated any district policies regarding staff rights to freedom of expression outside of work.

"I don't think that the district has any qualms with them saying what they said, but they certainly have to do it according to the policy," Nelson said. "The investigation probably centers more around that than about the content."

In the video, Damiano and Medart lobbied against LGBTQ equality legislation, particularly with regard to transgender rights, currently before Congress and the Oregon Legislature.

They also argued for policy changes that would restrict use of restrooms to "anatomically-male" and "anatomically-female," put limits on student name changes, and mandate that neither staff nor classmates have to call transgender students by their preferred names or their preferred pronouns. Transgender students could request a private bathroom or locker room, depending on availability.

District policies relevant to the investigation may include a staff social media policy passed by the board in early March and a policy on staff political participation that is up for minor revisions at the upcoming Tuesday board meeting, according to board secretary Tonya Doane.

The recently-passed staff social media policy states that, "Staff actions on social media websites, public websites and blogs, while on or off duty, which disrupt the school environment, may be subject to disciplinary action up to and including dismissal."

In a statement released Wednesday, the school district did not identify Damiano or Medart by name or by position. A statement from Superintendent Kirk Kolb referred in vague terms to "social media postings discussing LGBTQ policies with reference to schools" and "complaints that two staff members made these postings."

Kolb stated that both staff members are not working at present and that an investigation is in progress.

"Grants Pass School District 7 is committed to providing welcoming and safe learning environments for all students, including our LGBTQ students," the statement said.

The video was filmed at Edgewater Christian Fellowship in Grants Pass, but lead pastor Matt Heverly said that was where the connection between the church and the movement ends.

"We were the staging grounds. The content and the people involved in it are entirely the ones that wrote, directed and came up with the information," Heverly said.

Damiano and Medart did not respond for comment when asked if the organization called I Resolve Movement was their creation alone versus the product of a partnership with a larger group or organization.

In the video, the two referred to themselves only as Southern Oregon teachers and were not more specific where or for which school district.

Medart, a seventh grade science teacher, mentioned a former female student who requested the use of male pronouns and a male preferred name while in her class though she did not include further identifying details about the student.

A statement provided by Kristin Hosfelt, district communications specialist, on behalf of the district on Wednesday said, "The social media posts by District staff members were not approved or endorsed" by the district.

The district's response to the controversy comes 14 months after the district paid a total of \$425,000 to settle two lawsuits for discrimination and whistleblower retaliation by two campus monitors.

An internal investigation by the district's own lawyers while the litigation was pending concluded the district had a "deficiency in cultural awareness and sensitivity" and that the district couldn't verify that all complaints of harassment were adequately investigated.

The internal investigation was sparked in part by an ill-fated prank by the senior class in 2019 that included tortillas being spread around the classroom of a Spanish language teacher.

A press release authored by Damiano and Medart as "private citizens" on Friday suggested that "a number" of school district "leaders" were aware of and in support of the I Resolve Movement prior to the video's mounting controversy over the past few days.

"Once [district leaders] received disrespectful and hateful push back they reacted by removing us from work and issued statements against our movement," the press release read. "The district has publicly stated that our 'movement' is in 'direct conflict with the values of Grants Pass School District 7.'"

Medart and Damiano said that the "I Resolve policies" have already received over 200 signatures from community members.

A 39-second video posted by the I Resolve Movement on Thursday appeared to set the record straight on the intentions of the movement. The video has no sound and lists a number of tenets that the movement supports. The second tenet featured stated: "We are ... Pro protecting each individual's freedom of speech." The video goes on to reiterate in writing some other facets of the gender identity resolution presented in the original video.

The movement has received opposition from LGBTQ leaders both locally and statewide.

Rachel Mercurio, a Grants Pass High School special education teacher, served as the adviser for the school's Southern Oregon Pride club from its inception in 2010 until last year.

Mercurio said that the district has worked on equity policies over the past few years that affect LGBTQ students with "some really great successes."

When she saw the I Resolve video, however, she felt that it was "a step backwards." "It's just disheartening to have this happen. The students are the ones that are being negatively impacted," Mercurio said.

Mercurio said that she personally believes that the educators involved in the video should be held accountable. "In my personal beliefs, when we infringe on the rights of youth, there should be actions taken, for sure," Mercurio said, adding, "I think it's a fireable stance that they took because we [in the district] have a zero policy toward any sort of discrimination or bullying."

Mercurio added that many teachers seek to accept students as they are. "There are a lot of supporting, empathetic teachers who love the students for who they are," Mercurio said.

Deenie Bulyalert, a sophomore at GPHS who is a member of the school's Pride club, said she was disappointed to see district educators involved in the video.

"I didn't like the fact that teachers were being open about this topic in a way where they were risking some of their LGBTQ students and creating an environment that wasn't safe," Bulyalert said.

Bulyalert said that the consensus among the friends that she has talked with is that the educators involved "shouldn't be working with students" and should be fired.

"When you have teachers like this who are vocal, it just creates an unsafe environment for [LGBTQ students] because it makes them feel unaccepted in a place where it's already so hard to be accepted," Bulyalert said.

Jenn Burleton, program director of the TransActive Gender Project at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, called the I Resolve video "deceptive" and said it includes misinformation about transgender identity.

"They [Damiano and Medart] tried to perpetuate this notion that sexuality and biology really does only come in male or female flavors, and that anything else is nonsense," Burleton said.

Burleton added that the focus on anatomy could have serious implications for the privacy of students and staff. "Their resolution appears to really amplify their thought that students and staff should be more revealing about what they have between their legs, which is just remarkably invasive and in violation of so many different privacy protections," Burleton said.

Burleton said that "there should be consequences" for Medart and Damiano since they referenced their profession as educators in the publicized video. Burleton specifically encouraged the district to pursue professional development education for faculty and staff that would provide "fact-based information about gender diversity in students."

Reverend Ryan Scott of the Newman United Methodist Church in Grants Pass said he found the video "disturbing."

"I am deeply concerned at the lack of knowledge these educators have when it comes to understanding transgender people," Scott said. "I would implore the school district to take action in educating all of their staff on people who are transgender."

Nelson, the school board chairman, said that the video has clearly made a splash around town but that he does not believe the content is unusually provocative.

"I think this topic has got people riled up for lots of different reasons," he said. "As I watched I just thought, these are two women who are trying to come up with solutions."

Reach reporter Natalie Skowlund at 541-474-3813 or nskowlund@thedailycourier.com.