

Showing support at Glen Cove; Hundreds show support for Glen Cove staff in wake of parent's comments

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Body

A protest held at Glen Cove Elementary on Friday included more than 200 people following comments at a recent Roanoke County School Board meeting during which a parent accused multiple faculty members of being "predators" and "groomers."

"When I learned that the school board themselves were inadvertently showing their support for the people saying hurtful things that's when I really got upset and felt the need to support the teachers that were not being supported by their employers," Samantha Newell, an LGBTQ+ ally, Glen Cove parent and the event's organizer, said Friday.

The comments made by Glen Cove parent and local real estate broker Damon Gettier - who said there were LGBTQ+ decorations in some of the classrooms - followed a more ambiguous Facebook live video he made in April, where he did not specifically state his disdain for the decorations.

"What I'm here to talk about is the child abuse, grooming, conditioning and indoctrination by sexual predators disguised as teachers and staff at Glen Cove Elementary," he said at the May 18 school board meeting.

While Gettier did not mention staff by name, he named jobs that only have one person in those roles at the school.

"It became apparent that the guidance counselor, the school psychologist, the assistant principal and the music teacher were bent on indoctrinating our children on LGBTQA and not on reading, writing and arithmetic," Gettier said.

He said he became aware of rainbows in some classrooms in mid-April, while conversing with his son and another student who attends Glen Cove.

The boys told Gettier "how a staff person had told them that a boy could be a girl and a girl could be a boy and that they could decide," Gettier said.

Gettier distributed to school board members four photos he said were from this year's Glen Cove yearbook. Three depicted teachers wearing rainbow-style clothing, jewelry or accessories. The fourth was a rainbow-colored sign declaring "EVERYONE WELCOME."

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"The yearbook handout I gave you, that is the yearbook published and given out to children this year. Who approved that who thought those pictures were appropriate?" he asked the board.

Another parent with knowledge of the situation, Winter Schassberger, wrote on Facebook in late April about a meeting that took place at the school where certain teachers were told they could not display rainbows in their classroom or on their clothing, following Gettier's complaints to the school system.

"Some of the items were LGBTQ+ affirming and some were just rainbows. Some of the staff identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community and some do not," she wrote in her April 28 post.

Upset with how the school system handled the matter, Schassberger also wrote that RCPS used a "slapdash solution to appease a group of parents who subscribe to the notion that their beliefs are the only beliefs that matter."

The Virginia ACLU said if the school system targeted LGBTQ+ individuals, it believes the law was broken.

"Since 2020, employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity has clearly violated federal and Virginia state law, following the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Bostock v. Clayton County* and the General Assembly's passage of the Virginia Values Act respectively," Virginia ACLU Transgender Rights Attorney Wyatt Rolla wrote in an email. "If a school system disciplined only LGBTQ+ employees for certain behavior and did not apply those same standards to other employees, it would almost certainly run afoul of these protections."

Wyatt also wrote "a school policy that singles out Pride flags and other expressions of support for the LGBTQ+ community would likely violate the First Amendment's prohibition on "viewpoint discrimination" by banning a specific message - one of inclusion and affirmation for LGBTQ+ students."

Gettier initially agreed to speak to The Roanoke Times on May 10 about his Facebook post.

"Sure. I will reach out tomorrow. Not sure a liberal newspaper will like my position though and I know the offending teachers and admin have reached out to your paper," he wrote on Facebook Messenger.

Following his initial message, Gettier did not respond to multiple follow up attempts, and told Roanoke Times columnist Dan Casey earlier this week he was not interested in speaking about his comments at the board meeting.

A current staffer at Glen Cove who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of job reprisals said that "four or five" school employees had been warned about rainbow decorations, clothing and attire in meetings with administrators - but that other staffers had not.

Since the incident began circulating on social media last month, many parents have spoken out against Gettier's comments, and how the school system allegedly handled the situation.

When asked via email May 2 if a policy was made for some staff at Glen Cove to not wear or display anything with rainbows following Gettier's complaints, school system spokesman Chuck Lionberger responded May 4, writing "this is a personnel issue and, therefore, we will not offer any comment."

After being asked more questions following his response, such as why a potential policy implemented by the school system was a personnel issue, or if any other schools had been told not to wear rainbows, Lionberger responded "I'm sorry, but we do not intend to offer any further comments."

However, Lionberger did confirm to the newspaper this week that nine staffers have resigned, 17% of the school's full-time staff.

The nine positions have since been filled, Lionberger wrote in an email.

Superintendent Ken Nicely released a statement early Friday afternoon as the peaceful demonstration was getting underway.

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"While we cannot comment on the specifics of a personnel matter, we do want to affirm that Roanoke County Public Schools' focus is on our students and their learning and wellbeing," he wrote. "Our baseline belief is that our schools must be safe and caring places for all students, where they can learn free of disruption."

The school board has also received pushback since the May 18 meeting for allowing Gettier to identify Glen Cove employees during his public comments.

Before the public comment portion of the meeting started, Chairman Brent Hudson asked speakers to keep comments to three minutes, and to "keep your comments respectful and polite."

At no time did the school board intervene when Gettier called certain staff "predators" and "groomers," nor did it when he named them by their position at the school.

Hudson also allowed Gettier to speak for approximately a minute and a half after his allotted time was up.

Hudson did not respond to an email asking why he and other board members allowed Gettier to speak longer and out employees, while also accusing them of being sexual predators.

During the board comments portion of the meeting, board members **Cheryl Facciani**, David Linden and Hudson spoke out against "propaganda" and "**indoctrination**" in the school system.

Hudson said it was "very concerning some of the things that have been brought to our attention."

The Roanoke Times contacted Hudson earlier this month about the matter, and he denied spearheading the meeting that led to the removal of the rainbows.

"We will definitely be looking into that. Social agendas and propaganda have no place in our schools," he said.

Glen Cove is located in the Catawba District, which Hudson represents.

"I certainly heard some concerning stuff tonight that I hope we'll get an update on," Linden said. "There's certainly no room for **indoctrination** in our schools. And that's something that I know that this board is certainly going to look into."

Facciani followed up Linden's comments with some of her own.

"And I agree our current policies are lacking and needs to clearly set expectations and limitations when it comes to propaganda in our classrooms," she said. "My belief is the only flag that should be flying in our schools is the American flag.

"If you can't fly religious flags. If you can't fly satanic flags or political flags, you just can't have it both ways. Flags are not essential for demonstrating and teaching kindness, accepting others or embracing our differences."

The Virginia Education Association is now involved as well.

Dorothy Carter is director of Commonwealth UniServ, the agency representing teachers in Botetourt, Franklin, Craig and Roanoke counties, and in the cities of Salem and Roanoke. Carter said she could not speak about anything the union may be doing, but said the idea that Glen Cove is rife with sexual predators is ridiculous.

"If all this were true, Child Protective Services would've been called, and state police would be investigating," Carter said.

She also said Hudson should have reprimanded Gettier for outing the teachers and for essentially calling them criminals.

RCPS teacher, and teacher's union president, Courtney Curtright, said the union wants "safe schools for all of our students and safe working conditions for all of our teachers."

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Roanoke County is by no means the only locality dealing with the idea teachers are indoctrinating students with LGBTQ+ "propaganda" and "indoctrination."

Stories have been published about school systems all over the country dealing with similar issues, and a member from a Mom's for Liberty chapter said there is a plan by President Joe Biden's administration and teacher's unions, among others, to indoctrinate students in an effort break up the traditional nuclear family.

A recent report by CNN looking into the conservative organization, which many describe as a hate group, talked to El Paso County, Colorado chapter chair Darcy Schoening, who shared her conspiracy theory with reporter Elle Reeve.

When asked why the aforementioned groups would want to make more students gay or trans, Schoening said "because it breaks down the family unit, which breaks down traditional conservative values ... It changes the way people think. It changes the way people think about politics."

Reeves followed the comments by stating there is no evidence of a coordinated plot to make kids transgender in the U.S.

Roanoke County also has a Mom's for Liberty Group, but its online communications are closed to the public. Facciani has posted on its forum, according to a message obtained by The Roanoke Times.

Many people against the inclusion of LGBTQ+ symbols in schools have made it a religious issue in addition to a political one.

Rhonda Thorne, the minister at Metropolitan Community of the Blue Ridge, a church that started for LGBTQ+ resident, but welcomes anyone, said God does not discriminate with his love.

Thorne, who identifies as LGBTQ+, said people who use God as an excuse to discriminate against others are misguided.

"We interpret scriptures differently. If we say God is love, then God can be nothing but love. God created a beautiful and awesome creation," she said. "And that even goes back to Genesis, when God looked at God's creation and said it was good. And so it can't be anything less than that."

Sarah Goodman who has taught at Cave Spring Middle School for the last 16 years said actions, or lack thereof, by the school board since Hudson and Facciani began serving in 2022, are the reason she decided to retire from teaching after the current school year.

Goodman said the board's response to this latest incident just "reaffirms her decision" to leave the county's school system.

"She [Facciani] doesn't believe in getting input from teachers about our own jobs, because she thinks she knows better about our jobs," Goodman said. "There's been a lot of comments that she has made about no need for diversity, inclusion and equity."

Graphic

Event organizer Samantha Newell, a parent of a Glen Cove fifth-grader, and Roanoke City Vice-Mayor Joe Cobb speak during a pro-pride protest at Glen Cove Elementary School Friday, May 26, 2023, in Roanoke County. More than 200 gathered following comments at a Roanoke County School Board meeting where a parent accused multiple faculty members at the school of being "predators" and "groomers." Scott P. Yates Event organizer Samantha Newell, parent of Glen Cove fifth-grader Hadley, 10, at left, talks with attendees after a pro-pride protest

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at Glen Cove Elementary School on Friday in Roanoke County. More than 200 gathered following comments at a school board meeting where a parent accused multiple faculty members at the school of being "predators" and "groomers." SCOTT P. YATES, The Roanoke Times Event organizer Samantha Newell, parent of Glen Cove fifth-grader Hadley, 10, at left, talks with attendees after a pro-pride protest at Glen Cove Elementary School on Friday in Roanoke County. More than 200 gathered following comments at a school board meeting where a parent accused multiple faculty members at the school of being "predators" and "groomers." SCOTT P. YATES, The Roanoke Times More than 200 people protested outside Glen Cove Elementary School Friday in Roanoke County in response to recent issues within the school that has prompted numerous staff resignations. SCOTT P. YATES, The Roanoke Times More than 200 people protested outside Glen Cove Elementary School Friday in Roanoke County in response to recent issues within the school that has prompted numerous staff resignations. SCOTT P. YATES, The Roanoke Times Ravenne Weddle, 17, a student at Northside High School who identifies as queer and non-binary, blows bubbles at a pro-pride protest at Glen Cove Elementary School Friday in Roanoke County. Weddle said they attended the event because they know what it's like to be singled out for being different. SCOTT P.

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