

Admired Brighton teacher fights to keep job in rare open termination proceeding

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A well-known and admired Brighton High School English teacher sought to avoid being fired by the district Wednesday in an unusually open termination hearing before dozens of supporters.

Termination hearings, known as 3020-a proceedings, are generally kept strictly confidential to protect the teacher's reputation in case the hearing officer rules in his favor. This one was different because Jim Quinlisk, the teacher in question, took out a classified advertisement in the *Brighton-Pittsford Post* last week alerting residents to his case and urging them to come and support him.

The hearing was public but the voluminous documentation associated with it, including the district's formal charges, was not. The room in which it was conducted only had about 35 chairs set out so that many people supporting Quinlisk were turned away, much to their frustration.

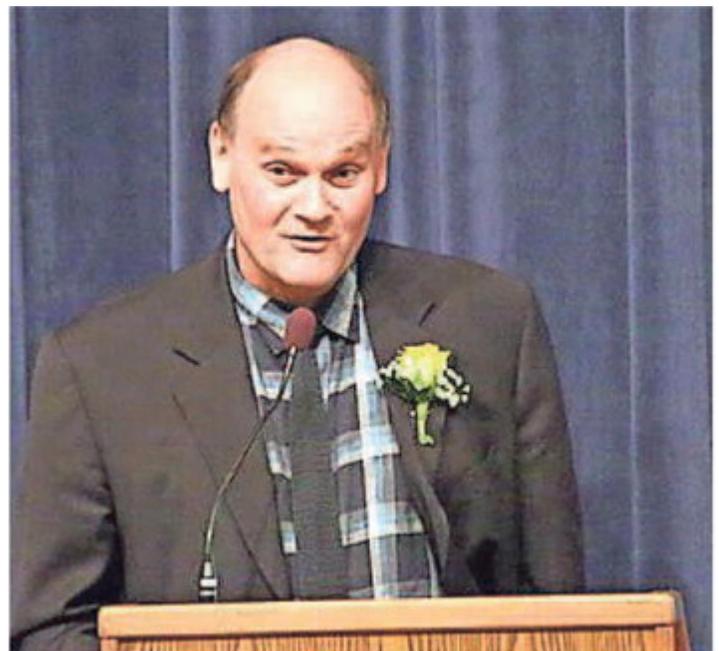
The district's lawyer, Douglas Gerhardt, laid out in extensive detail a series of allegations that Brighton argues amount to insubordination and conduct unbecoming a teacher. Quinlisk, an 18-year veteran, was described as intolerant of challenges to his authority from either students or administrators and heedless of the district's stated goal of combating racism and inequity.

Two recent incidents

Two incidents were related to interactions with students. In one case, while reading aloud from the play "Macbeth," a student hesitated at the word "niggard," meaning miser.

Quinlisk told the class, incorrectly, that "niggard" and the n-word were related, both having "come from Africa" (the words are unrelated, and both derive from the Indo-European language family). In the course of his explanation he said the n-word several times.

He also told the class that words have no inherent power to harm — in other words, as Assistant Principal Michael Pincelli said in testimony, that "it's my decision whether a word spoken by someone else is harmful to me." A black student and her mother reported the incident to the school, and the girl re-



Jim Quinlisk speaks after receiving a lifetime achievement award from the Brighton Parent-Teacher-Student Association in 2018. PROVIDED PHOTO

quested to switch out of Quinlisk's class.

In another incident, a student alleged that Quinlisk had "called her out" in front of the class over her plan to study abroad in Israel for the spring. He warned her that her grades in his class and others would likely

— and that Pincelli, his direct supervisor, had written him a glowing commendation for it. Quinlisk's many supporters Wednesday said he was a brilliant teacher who challenged his students and was being targeted unfairly because he pushed back against

suffer, and observed that he couldn't "take a vacation" in the middle of the year and still get paid. Three other issues had to do with the district's charge of insubordination. The district alleged that:

■ Quinlisk, miffed at a rule change allowing students to enroll in Advanced Placement courses without a teacher's recommendation, "made a mockery of" his recommendations two years in a row, first putting zero students up for AP English, then recommending every student but two — one of them black and the other a girl who frequently had challenged his authority.

■ For his annual self-directed professional development program, Quinlisk said he was going to "read the Bible," better to discuss the moral decisions of literary characters with students. Pincelli asked him to revise the plan to consider non-Christian sources as well, but Quinlisk did not do so.

■ When Quinlisk and another teacher were both teaching sections of the same course, administrators directed that they should have a common final exam. Quinlisk did not cooperate but instead gave his students a take-home exam and did not show up for his proctoring assignment.

'Top-notch, college-level teacher'

Quinlisk's lawyer, Jason Jaros, was limited to cross-examination on Wednesday, and Quinlisk did not speak at all. Jaros poked at the district's case, pointing out there was no specific prohibition against use of the word at the time Quinlisk uttered it and calling the study abroad issue a case of miscommunication with administration. He painted some of the allegations, including the Advanced Placement recommendations, as instances where the district was infringing upon Quinlisk's professional prerogative. Judging by their muttering in the audience, several of his Brighton High School colleagues agreed.

Most strikingly, Jaros also noted that Quinlisk received a lifetime achievement award from the district's parentteacher-student organization in 2018

administrators. For the most part, they defended him without knowing the details of the charges.

Rory Kuczek, a 2017 alumna, said Quinlisk had always given her a great deal of constructive criticism, including on her college admissions essay. "I'm honestly a better writer for it," she said.

Her mother, Katy Kuczek, called him a "topnotch, college-level teacher" and added: "If this guy had racist tendencies, I think it would have come out (before now)." Another former student, Shivani Singh, said she believes racism is a significant issue in Brighton, but said firing Quinlisk was "not going to solve the problem." Quinlisk, the district, the Brighton Teachers Association and the state Education Department, which runs 3020-a hearings, all declined to comment on the case.

Disciplinary hearings rare in New York

The hearing continues Thursday morning but will be closed for much of the day, as students will be testifying. They will resume for a third day Sept. 10. The hearing officer, Ira Lobel, has 30 days from the hearing to decide whether Quinlisk should be terminated or otherwise disciplined.

3020-a hearings are the mechanism to fire tenured teachers. Because of the expense and effort involved they are quite uncommon; in more cases, a district comes to some sort of informal agreement with the teacher in question. In response to a 2016 Freedom of Information request from the *Democrat and Chronicle*, the state Education Department provided information showing that only 99 teachers across New York had been disciplined under 3020-a in the preceding four years, including three from Monroe County.

Fewer than half of those disciplined had been fired. The rest were fined, suspended or made to undergo counseling or treatment as necessary.

Investigations where no wrongdoing was found, conversely, are not made public. A Brighton spokesman said Quinlisk's case was the first the district had pursued in many years.

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