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TOPICAL

TOP STORY

Sultan: Festus teacher says she was fired for support of LGBTQ students

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Roland Magnusson ©123RF.COM

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By Aisha Sultan

Aisha Sultan is home and family editor for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

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Tricia Johnson's children started kindergarten and graduated high school in the same district where she's worked for 16 years.

When they were younger she filled in as a substitute. For the past five years, however, she's taught classes on literacy and academic success at Festus Middle School.

It's an average-sized middle school with about 500 students in a district with about 3,000 students. It's in Jefferson County, a politically conservative area in Missouri where 65% of voters supported Donald Trump in the last election.

Johnson had never had a problem in the district until shortly into the start of this school year. She asked her students to research their learning styles and design an ideal workspace for themselves. They created these designs on a regular-sized piece of paper, and she hung them on a bulletin board in her classroom. She's given this assignment several times before.

This time, one of her student's designs showed two anime characters holding hands in a room. In the upper corner of the page, she had put three small Pride flags. The flags associated with LGBTQ pride were about 1 inch tall and 4 inches across the paper. On the evening of Sept. 16, Johnson says her principal, Jacob Munoz, called her at home to say one of her student's parents complained that she had displayed a picture of two girls in bed kissing. She informed him that wasn't true.

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He went to investigate in her class and noticed the paper with the 1-inch Pride flags.

When Johnson showed up at work the next day, the student's work was missing from the board. She immediately took down the other projects.

"I can't have one student left out," she explained.

The principal asked to see her in his office.

She says he pointed to the flags on the student's paper, and said to her, "We can't promote this."

"I don't see anything wrong with the picture," she said.

"You know I'm a conservative Christian," he responded, according to Johnson. He also questioned her about a Love Languages quiz that is part of her curriculum. She explained that it's the same quiz designed for children that the district's guidance counselors gives to fourth graders to help them better understand how they communicate. She remembers when her son's results were shared with her when he was in fourth grade.

The principal told her it was inappropriate.

The next day she received an electronic request from the superintendent and assistant superintendent to view her lesson plans, which she granted. Her principal asked for another meeting in which he gave her a disciplinary memo criticizing her teaching and judgment. It reprimanded her for having sexually suggestive content inappropriate for middle schoolers in her classroom.

She told the principal that she didn't think the school should be censoring student work.

"He asked me if I would have hung up a swastika or Confederate flag," Johnson said.

"Those are not remotely the same thing," she replied. She recalls him saying the anime characters in the student's drawing were standing too close to one another. He asked her to turn in her lesson plans in advance for him to review every week.

At this point, Johnson followed the instructions given to her. She never displayed any of the other designs. She never administered the Love Languages quiz again. But she refused to back down in her support of her student's work. She wrote a response to the reprimand and sent it

to the principal and superintendent. The eventual reply from her principal criticized her professionalism and said she had violated students' rights with the quiz at the beginning of the year. By the end of October, she filed a grievance against the district for discriminating against her student. She asked for the disciplinary note to be removed, for an independent investigation and for diversity training for all the staff in the district.

“I felt like if I let this go, this would be happening to other kids, and I didn’t want that,” she said.

“The first question the investigator asked me was ‘Why did you choose this hill to die on?’ she said. His report found no evidence of discrimination.

She appealed to the Festus School Board.

They listened to her side and eventually denied that the district had violated any of the policies she outlined in her case. She

filed a complaint in February with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Earlier this month, her principal informed her that they would not be rehiring her for the next school year. He gave her an annual review that said she was an ineffective teacher and unprofessional.

After that meeting, she went to her classroom and cried.

“I love my job,” she said. “I love teaching.”

When I reached out to Superintendent Link Luttrell about Johnson’s allegations he said privacy laws prevented the district from speaking about any personnel issues. The district released a statement saying, “When any individual standards are not met, efforts are made to address those areas and work collaboratively with the employee to improve. It is disheartening when someone chooses instead to distribute a false narrative to discredit others.”

Johnson, who has shared the letters from her principal and her responses, says she knew that she might lose her job when she refused to back down.

Link Luttrell will retire as superintendent of the Festus School District at the end of the 2021-2022 school year.

“The whole reason I became a teacher is because I love kids, and I wanted to be a positive force in their lives,” she said. “If I let this go, then I’ve failed.”

Her daughter started a **Change.org petition** asking the district to rehire her mother.

More than 3,600 have signed in support of Johnson, so far. She’s received countless supportive messages from current and former students.

“We stand behind you, Mrs. Johnson,” they said. “We’ve got your back.”

What a shame the district didn't have hers.

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