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Connetquot schools sued by teacher over pride flag policy



Connetquot High School math teacher Chris Dolce has sued the school district over its pride flag policy. Credit: Barry Sloan

By Dandan Zou

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A high school teacher has filed a lawsuit against the Connetquot school district over its 2022 policy to remove pride flags, the focus of a long-simmering controversy that has led to protests, a state investigation and heated school board meetings.

The suit, filed Tuesday in Suffolk County Supreme Court, seeks unspecified monetary damages and “injunctive relief,” including a reversal of district policies, according to the complaint and Andrew Lieb, a Smithtown-based attorney representing the plaintiff.

Christopher Dolce, 44, a math teacher at Connetquot High School since 2001, alleged the district’s policies to ban pride flags, and later stickers, were discriminatory. His attorney, Lieb, called them “a quasi ‘Don’t say gay’ policy.”

The lawsuit alleged those policies created a hostile environment and deprived Dolce of his rights to express himself and decorate his classroom as he wishes.

“The district can't behave this way,” said Dolce, who is gay, on Wednesday. “They can't get away with being discriminatory and treating people as somehow less than — people who are dedicated members of their community.”

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District officials did not respond to a request for comment Wednesday.

The controversy began in September 2022 when Sarah Ecke, another math teacher at Connetquot High, [refused to take down two flags](#) — a rainbow flag and a Progress Pride flag — in her classroom after Jaelyn Napolitano-Furno, a school board member, and Lee Kennedy, a board member who did not seek reelection last year, visited her classroom with Superintendent Lynda G. Adams, who retired last June.

Ecke's classroom was also where the school's Gay-Straight Alliance club members met.

Weeks later, Reza Kolahifar, assistant superintendent for administration and personnel, issued a directive that only the American and New York State flags can be hung in classrooms, citing a district policy that said school employees should not engage in political activities on school premises.

That same month, in October, a student replaced the pride stickers with those depicting the American flag on Dolce's classroom door, according to the lawsuit. The student also “targeted” the classrooms of Ecke and a third teacher, who are both members of the LGBTQ+ community, according to the suit.

The student was initially given a three-day suspension, according to the lawsuit. The next day, that decision was overturned by Adams.

“I have been heartbroken lately by the state of our district. After over 20 years of giving my all to the students of Connetquot, I left the building in tears today,” Dolce wrote in an October 2022 email to Adams, which was part of the suit’s exhibits. “Why are you allowing this bigotry and hate to divide our community? Do you not see the hurt that is being inflicted on your staff and our students?”

After the October incident, anti-LGBTQ+ writings were made on school walls on at least three separate occasions, the lawsuit said.

Michael Moran, the high school principal, abruptly took a leave of absence last March but came back in April, following student protests and calls for his return.

A spokeswoman for the state Division of Human Rights, which was [directed by Gov. Kathy Hochul in 2022 to investigate](#), said Wednesday the investigation is ongoing.

The lawsuit named the district, the school board, Adams, Moran, Kolahifar, Napolitano-Furno and Kennedy as defendants. Adams could not be reached for comment. Napolitano-Furno did not respond to a request for comment Wednesday. Efforts to reach school board president Marissol Mallon were unsuccessful Wednesday.

Kennedy, who was on the school board for 24 years, said [in a board meeting last April](#): “What happened to the LGBT community, I think, was unfair.”

Napolitano-Furno and Kennedy quarreled at that meeting. “A classroom had to be neutralized because students and their parents complained,” Napolitano-Furno said then.

“Connetquot should be a place of learning, discovery and teaching acceptance,” Kennedy said in a phone interview Wednesday. “Intolerance is not an option.”



By **Dandan Zou**

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Dandan Zou covers education for Newsday. Previously, she worked for a community newspaper in Maryland and a personal finance magazine in Washington, D.C.

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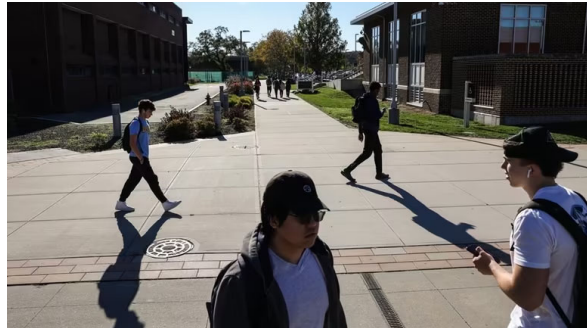
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