Embattled teacher counters charges

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Jim Quinlisk, the Brighton High School English teacher facing termination for alleged insubordination and insensitive comments, defended himself Monday as a dedicated educator being punished for looking “for ways to engage and be provocative” in the classroom. Quinlisk, an 18-year veteran and recipient of a lifetime achievement award from the district’s parent-teacher-student organization, also spoke Tuesday on his third and final day of 3020-a hearings, the state’s mechanism to remove a tenured teacher.

Over the first two days, last month, the district painted him as insubordinate and vindictive, unwilling to brook challenges to his authority. One incident involved him using the N-word during an erroneous classroom explanation of the unrelated word “niggard.” In a phone interview Monday, Quinlisk said he feels an obligation to defend himself.

“Teaching and education are about sharing ideas and opinions,” he said. “When that is taken away, I guess you don’t have a true educational atmosphere.”

Part of being a good teacher, he said, is “to look for ways to engage and be provocative.

“Sometimes you engage your students and inspire them; sometimes you don’t. I just hope I’ve engaged and inspired more. For those I haven’t, I gave it my best shot.”

Asked whether he would take back any of his actions, he said he wished he could have spoken with the black student who was offended by his use of the N-word. He did not, though, believe he was wrong in saying it.

“I feel terrible the kid had to go through something like that and I didn’t get to explain myself,” he said.

But, he continued: “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it. I’m an English teacher; you’re supposed to talk about words. Just mentioning the word as, ‘This is the word’ – I don’t think that’s offensive.”

He told his English students that slurs have no power unless people give it to them, an idea he said he got from Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. In making its case against him, the district contended that it is not for Quinlisk to decide how black students, among others, interpret the N-word. Brighton town board member Robin Wilt attended the second day of the hearing. She said it seemed to be a matter of Quinlisk’s intent versus the impact his words had, particularly for students of color.

“Though his intent might have been instructional, I’m not quite certain that using the N-word multiple times in a conversation is necessarily going to be instructional,” she said. “A student withdrew from his class as a result of this exchange, and the student experienced trauma. That word has a lot of historical baggage; that’s why it’s not bandied around in general discussion.”

Insubordination?

Regarding the charges of insubordination, he said: “I feel I was going and doing my job as effectively and as well as I could. It never has been, in mind, about being confrontational and rebellious and not following along with direction. ... The fact that they found grounds (for termination), supposedly, against me, is not because I was going out there baiting them or looking for trouble in that regard.”
Superintendent Kevin McGowan would not comment on Quinlisk’s remarks but said the district and the school board “are resolute in their commitment to the students of the BCSD.”

Quinlisk said he hopes to be vindicated and allowed to return to teach. He complained that “there’s no consequence for the district” in bringing the 3020-a charges against him, and said he didn’t relish the idea of “going back to work for these people who have called me a racist and an anti-Semite.”

At the same time, he noted the support he has received from current and former students and their families. There were more such supporters than seats available the first day of the hearing.

“I love teaching. I’d like to think I’ve been a good teacher, that I’ve inspired some students,” he said. “I know I certainly have been inspired by them. The support I’ve gotten from students and parents and more has been heartfelt and wonderful.”

Notably absent in the chorus of support for Quinlisk has been the Brighton Teachers Association and New York State United Teachers. The local union declined to comment last month and did not respond to a request this week.

In a statement, NYSUT spokesman Matthew Hamilton wrote: “We work to ensure our members’ due process rights are respected, but it would be inappropriate to comment on potential outcomes to a pending disciplinary matter.”

3020-a procedures are almost always kept strictly confidential, but the accused educator has the right to make them public if he wishes. The alternative, Quinlisk said, is “taking a deal” and submitting quietly to termination.

“It’s a Russian gulag thing — one day you’re there, the next you’re gone,” he said. “That’s what I’m fighting against. ... I was told not to speak. I know I have a right to speak.”

A final determination from hearing officer Ira Sobel will not come for at least a month.

Quinlisk