

Anti-gay post on teacher's Facebook page stirs firestorm

by [Steve Strunsky](#)

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UNION TOWNSHIP, N.J. (RNS) It began last week with a single online comment, one critical of a high school display marking Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender History Month.

It soon ballooned into a harangue against homosexuality, a "perverted spirit" and a "sin" that "breeds like cancer."

"Why parade your unnatural immoral behaviors before the rest of us?" a woman who identified herself as Viki Knox wrote on Facebook. "I DO NOT HAVE TO TOLERATE ANYTHING OTHERS WISH TO DO. I DO HAVE TO LOVE AND SPEAK AND DO WHAT'S RIGHT!"

Had the comments appeared without a name on some anonymous message board, they almost certainly would have been lost in the flotsam of the Internet.

But Knox is a teacher at Union High School, and the inflammatory thread on her public Facebook page has created a firestorm in Union Township and beyond, with calls for her dismissal, an investigation by the school district and criticism from state gay rights advocates.

"Ms. Knox has the freedom to say whatever she wants. But her employer has every right to hold her accountable," said Steven Goldstein, chairman of the gay rights group Garden State Equality. "Teachers are supposed to be role models for our children, not hatemongers."

The controversy raises a broader question about the free speech rights of teachers in the age of social media as more educators come

under fire for posting their views online. It also prompted Goldstein to question whether a teacher intolerant of homosexuality or alternative lifestyles could enforce New Jersey's new anti-bullying law.

Knox did not return several phone messages. Her husband, encountered outside the couple's home, declined to comment.

Union Chief School Administrator Patrick Martin said the district is investigating the comments. He declined to provide any information about Knox, including the grade level or subject she teaches or whether any action has been taken.

State records show Knox has taught for at least 20 years, including 10 in the district, and earns \$70,688 a year. On her Facebook page, she describes herself as a special education teacher.

Knox is also faculty adviser for the school's Bible study group, the Seekers Fellowship, according to district records. On Facebook, she refers to herself under her religious views as a "Jesus freak."

It was last Wednesday (Oct. 5) when comments about the LGBT History Month display at the Union County school appeared on Facebook. The display, meant to promote tolerance, included photos of famous gay and transgender people.

"And it's still there!" the posting on Knox's page said. "I'm pitching a fit."

A handful of commentators agreed with that view, but others soon began objecting, leading to a passionate back-and-forth.

Later in the thread, a Union Township resident, Judy Amorosa, challenged the anti-gay stance. The thread shows Knox responding in religious terms.

"God cannot abide, tolerate, accept, go along with SIN. That's why Jesus came and gave his life as an offering for our souls; so we could once again be right-standing," Knox's page said. "Everything God has created, Satan has perverted, EVERYTHING! Sin is sin. Wrong is wrong."

A parent copied the remarks and forwarded them to attorney John Paragano, a former Union resident. Paragano, a former township councilman and municipal court judge, wrote on Saturday to the school district's chief administrator, urging Knox be dismissed.

"Hateful public comments from a teacher cannot be tolerated," Paragano wrote. "She has a right to say it. But she does not have a right to keep her job after saying it."

It's unclear if Knox was at school, at home or both when the comments were posted. She posted some shortly after noon last Wednesday.

Ed Barocas, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey, said Knox's Facebook comments are protected by the Constitution.

"Although we do not agree with the sentiments expressed on Ms. Knox's personal Facebook page, her comments are protected by the First Amendment," Barocas said. "The ACLU believes that the response to offensive speech is not the restriction of speech, but more speech."

(Ryan Hutchins and Mark Mueller of The Star-Ledger contributed to this report.)