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Complaint against Westwood Regional alleges bullying, discrimination

By Jason Braff

A family is claiming Westwood Regional School District administrators failed to adhere to the state's anti-discrimination law after their son, who is of Iraqi descent, allegedly suffered verbal and physical harassment at the hands of fellow students.

The lawsuit, which was received in state Superior Court in Bergen County on April 12, claims students had called the boy, who is now in seventh grade, numerous racial Muslim epithets, and a "terrorist" on multiple occasions since 2008.

The complaint also illustrates that the boy's parents, Dina Mustafa and Mustafa Muhsin, had addressed their concerns with the district's superintendent, the principals of each school the boy had attended in the district and two guidance counselors.

"The reason for bringing this lawsuit is to make sure that this stops so their children can continue to enjoy this school district, which they moved to town to enjoy," said Silvana Raso, the family's attorney. "They moved to Westwood because of the good school system and what they believed would be a safe environment for their children."

The complaint was filed under the New Jersey Law Against Discrimination (LAD). The suit claims the defendants, listed as the Westwood Board of Education, Superintendent Geoffrey Zoeller and seven other administrators and counselors, "violated the laws of this state" by failing or refusing "to take any affirmative action against such harassment, thus showing that such harassment was tolerated and accepted... in violation of the LAD."

On Monday, Zoeller said he was bound by law not to address any specific incidents regarding students, however defended the district's practices when it comes to handling bullying complaints.

"We have acted swiftly and have dealt with every complaint brought to us," said Zoeller, who also said he had not been given a copy of the lawsuit as of Monday. "In every case where a complaint has been brought and legitimate findings had been found there has been swift disciplinary action taken. That has nothing to do with race, gender or religious

background. We treat all of these matters very seriously. No matter who the students is or what the complaint is, we've jumped on it immediately."

The alleged victim, who is currently 13-years-old, was harassed since his family to moved to Westwood from Paramus in 2006, Raso said.

Raso said the alleged victim's two sisters, who also attend the district, have not been harassed by other students because their names are not as "ethnically prominent" as their brother's.

The alleged victim "was told by students that he hates America... and all Muslims hate America," was punched and kicked, had racial slurs hurled at him and was accused of attending a "terrorist camp" when he came back from a vacation, the suit claims.

The Muhsin family retained Raso's services because they were "very concerned" about their son moving into the junior high school with older children.

Raso said litigating the matter was "the last choice" for the family.

"They tried to work with the school to have the school help them," Raso said. "But after so many years of dealing with this issue and seeing no change, other than the bullying getting worse, they became extremely concerned for their son."

The suit claims Mustafa and Muhsin spoke to administrators, teachers, vice principals, principals and the superintendent regarding their son's problems.

"You could have 100 [anti-bullying] programs. If they don't work, they're useless," Raso said. "If you have one program that works, that's what you should implement. ...I can tell you the discipline that they've given to the students clearly hasn't worked."

Zoeller referred questions about the Westwood Regional Middle School's anti-bullying policies to Charles Seipp, the school's principal and a defendant in the lawsuit.

Seipp also said he would not specifically discuss the lawsuit, but discussed the procedures the school already has in place when dealing with bullying and harassment. Seipp touted the school's preventative programs, saying there were numerous initiatives in place that involve both students and parents.

"Anything that has been reported follows the procedure I have outlined," Seipp said. "I am very comfortable with the actions this school has taken, which has happened every time there has been any allegation of bullying made."

Seipp said the middle school had created its own anti-bullying policy prior to the Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying Law was enacted.

"We have a lot going on here and I'm really proud of the programs we put in place to educate our whole community," Seipp said.