

# The Record

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## Lawsuit over bullying targets school district

### Westwood mom says concerns were ignored

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A lawsuit filed on Thursday on behalf of a Westwood middle-school student of Iraqi descent claims the district failed to stop relentless bullying by his classmates, including racial epithets, beatings and unflattering Facebook postings.

"Their response is always a pat on the head followed by, 'We will take care of it,'" the 13-year-old boy's mother, Dina Muhsin, said in interview at the

family's home on Thursday. "And then another incident happens a week later."

She said it had become so bad that she asked her son if he wanted to change his name, but he refused.

"My name is my name," the boy, Muhammed, interjected.

But Charles Seipp, principal of the Westwood Regional Middle School, said the school has been following an aggressive anti-bullying policy for years, even before a new state law against bul-

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CARMINE GALASSO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Dina Muhsin, left, is suing Westwood schools over bullying she says her son, Muhammed, endured. Lawyer Silvana Raso is with her. The family did not want Muhammed's picture taken.

## Suit: Mom takes bullying case to court

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ying took effect in 2011. Westwood School Superintendent Geoffrey Zoeller called the district's policy "unbelievably aggressive."

The regional district serves Westwood and Washington Township.

While school officials are prohibited from talking about an individual case, Seipp said the middle school of 450 students has received and investigated 12 bullying complaints this year.

"I think those numbers speak volumes about how effective our programs are," he said.

Schools throughout the state are being sued more often since Governor Christie signed the law — viewed by many as the strictest in the nation — that requires districts to provide anti-bullying safety teams and made recommendations on training and reporting of bullying incidents. Some say such suits are evidence that bullying, which was once a school administrative issue, is moving into the world of courts and legislatures.

"We expected it," said Mike

Yaple, spokesman for the New Jersey School Boards Association, pointing to anecdotal evidence that lawsuits have increased. "Every time you have a sweeping law, there will be more litigation, especially the first few years."

While the Muhsins' attorney, Silvana Raso, said their lawsuit was actually filed under the state law against discrimination, she also said the anti-bullying law could help in proving the school's alleged failure to comply with standards.

She said his parents approached her because with Muhammed heading to junior high school next year, they fretted that the bullying could get worse with the older students.

### 'School sits back'

In the interview, Dina Muhsin said her family moved to Westwood in 2006 primarily because of the schools. But, she said, Muhammed was subjected to taunting and beatings, beginning in fourth grade, that have continued until as recently as two weeks ago.

The suit, filed in state Superior Court in Hackensack, says that students hurled racial epithets at the boy and called him a "terrorist" and an "America hater." One asked if he had attended a terrorist camp during his vacation, and another inquired if he slept at night with an AK-47, the lawsuit alleges.

Muhsin said she contacted school officials after each incident to complain but got no action. And Raso said the family suggested that the school hold a diversity event, but officials were not receptive.

"The parents are the ones who are being proactive, while the school sits back and waits for things to happen," Raso said. In the lawsuit, she said school officials were "on notice of the discrimination and hostile school environment that Muhammed Muhsin has been subjected to."

Zoeller, the superintendent, said on Thursday he could not comment about the lawsuit and was barred by law from discussing a specific student. He referred

questions to Seipp.

Seipp said every allegation of bullying is investigated thoroughly, regardless of who made it. If the school found that a student has engaged in bullying, it would take disciplinary measures, which may include detention, a parenting conference, suspension or even calling the police.

The anti-bullying program also includes training, anti-bullying contests and other prevention programs, Seipp said.

As school let out on Thursday, The Record surveyed several middle school students about the allegations lodged in the Muhsins' suit. Most declined to comment, and others said they knew nothing about the claims.

Dina Muhsin said she and her husband, Mustafa, didn't want to become activists in a cause.

"We don't want our son to be the next Rosa Parks," she said. "We just want him to be able to go to school and come back home safe, just like any other student."

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