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City students file lawsuit

Allegations of bullying by Duggan teacher

BY MICHAEL PUFFER REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

WATERBURY — Attorneys representing three city students have filed a lawsuit claiming former Duggan Elementary School teacher Marylou Addona subjected the children "to a constant stream of bullying, abuse and harassment."

Addona was suspended for three days from her job teaching middle school students at Duggan in April, then transferred, after a student produced an audiotape of Addona apparently talking about the possibility of hitting one student, then belittling another.

Addona was moved into a new position of "teacher on special assignment" to the city's adult education program. She also retained her part-time job as the night principal for Waterbury Adult Continuing Education.

Local attorney Martin Minnella had promised a suit, which he filed this week in concert with Hartford attorney A. Paul Spinella.

The city's Board of Education, School Superintendent Kathleen Ouellette, Duggan Principal Patricia Frageau, Duggan Vice Principal Melissa Gugliotti and Addona are all named as defendants. Ellise Vasquez, Cynthia Brown and Raymond Willette are named as plaintiffs, representing their sons.

"And you, little boy, I heard you had an attitude today too," Addona is heard telling eighth-graders in a portion of the recording. "Is that true? What is your name anyway? (Child answers) Blake? What kind of name is Blake? Irish, Italian, French? What are you? White? You think you're cool with that name Blake, huh? You keep it up, (garbled) be calling you flake after awhile. (Children laughing.)"

Attempts to reach Addona, Gugliotti and Frageau through their unions were unsuccessful this week. Waterbury Teachers Association President Kevin Egan, on Friday, spoke for Addona.

"Our world is full of opportunists and Marty Minnella has a history of representing these types of cases," Egan said.

"I see it as a desperate attempt to sully the reputation of a teacher who has had a 17-year stellar career. Despite this case and situation, she will continue to do what she loves to do, and that is to serve the great children of Waterbury."

The suit filed this week claims Addona's abuses stretched far beyond the recorded incident. It claims Gugliotti, Frageau and Ouellette ignored concerns raised by parents.

The suit accuses Addona of threatening violence, screaming, throwing furniture against classroom walls, ridiculing students and spitting in their faces. Students were accused of being poor, retarded and unable to do well in life, the suit alleges.

Minnella and Spinella are seeking damages and compensation. Spinella said the boys are all in counseling. Apart from the audio tape, the case is built largely on the accounts of the students and parents.

Spinella said it is "pretty extraordinary" that even one of these incidents was taped. "You are talking about kids who are very vulnerable," he said. "They are not sophisticated about making a record for a lawsuit."

Minnella and Spinella have accused the district of treating the matter lightly even after the emergence of the recording.

School Chief Operating Officer Paul Guidone, however, said Addona was punished with three days without pay, a record of which, he says, will remain in her personnel file.

"I think we took appropriate action based on the circumstances and the review of the facts," Guidone said Friday.