

Parents sue School District 56 and board of trustees

Lawsuit claims district was negligent and didn't protect children

By Larry Franklin

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The parents of three former students at Bell Street Middle School are suing School District 56 and the district's board of trustees.

The parents allege their sons were three of the victims of sexual assault by Allenna Ward, a former teacher at Bell Street. Ward, 24, was sentenced in February to six years in prison after pleading guilty to six counts of sexual acts against minors.

Ward was a 23-year-old teacher at Bell Street Middle School when she began a sexual relationship with five male victims: three 14-year-olds and two 15-year-olds. According to arrest warrants, Ward committed the offenses between Jan. 1, 2006 and February, 2007.

Ward was charged last February with six counts of committing or attempting a lewd act upon a child under 16 and five counts of second-degree criminal sexual conduct. She pleaded guilty to three counts of each on Sept. 6, 2007, and the five remaining charges were dropped.

The three plaintiffs in the case are listed as: Jane Doe #1, Jane Doe #2 and Jane Doe #3 with the children's names being listed John Doe #1, John Doe #2 and John Doe #3.

The plaintiffs are listed by pseudonyms "because of the sensitive and private nature of these allegations."

Defendants in the case are: Laurens County School District 56, the district's board of trustees and the Laurens County Board of Education.

The civil action was mailed from Charleston last Thursday and will be filed in the Laurens County Court of Common Pleas.

Representing the plaintiffs are Lionel S. Lofton of Lofton and Lofton in Charleston and W. Townes Jones IV of Greenwood.

The defendants have 30 days to respond to the lawsuit.

The lawsuit lists three causes of action: gross negligence; negligent supervision, hiring, retention; and thirdly, breach of fiduciary duty.

The plaintiffs are seeking a jury trial and are seeking "actual and consequential damages in an amount to be determined by the court; for punitive or exemplary damages; and for the cost of this action, and for such other and further relief as this court deems to be just and proper."

In February, Fifth Circuit Judge Casey Manning sentenced Ward to 15 years, reduced to six, on each of three counts of committing or attempting a lewd act upon a child under 16. She was also sentenced to six years on each of three counts of second-degree criminal sexual conduct.

The six terms are being served concurrently, meaning Ward will be released in 2014. She could be released early with good behavior, but must serve at least 85 percent of the sentence and may serve up to the full six years.

Ward will not be subject to probation following her term. She will be required to register as a sex offender and wear a GPS monitoring device for the rest of her life.

Prior to being sentenced, Ward issued a brief apology to the victims and the community.

"I truly hope that each of these young men and this community can begin to heal," Ward said at her sentencing.