

Wilmington law firms announce 'independent civil investigation' into alleged New Hanover County Schools 'coverup'

By **Port City Daily staff** - January 31, 2020



Peter Michael Frank, 47. (Port City Daily photo / New Hanover County Sheriff's Office)

WILMINGTON — On Friday the two law firms currently representing victims of former teacher Michael Kelly in a civil suit against New Hanover County Schools announced a new investigation into how the district handled years of alleged misconduct by Roland Grise teacher Peter Frank.

The statement comes from the Lea/Shultz Law Firm and the Rhine Law Firm, which are jointly handling a class action lawsuit against New Hanover County Schools, currently representing six victims of sexual abuse by Michael Earl Kelly, who pleaded guilty last year to dozens of felony sex crime charges.

The firms stated that in building a case for the Kelly lawsuit, they had conducted an independent civil investigation into 'negligence' by the Board and administration, including

failure to report or act on information about Kelly's behavior and actions.

The firms stated they are now launching a comparable investigation in the Peter Michael Frank case; the investigation, according to these firms, will focus on whether "anyone employing Frank knew of his behavior and should bear any responsibility within our civil justice system to his victims."

Frank was arrested earlier this week on a dozen felony charges of indecent liberties with children and students. The subsequent release of search warrants for the personnel file on Frank revealed New Hanover County Schools (NHCS) was aware of a pattern of "inappropriate relationships" between Frank and students dating back to 1999.

While the Board of Education has denied failing to report any information about potential sexual misconduct to law enforcement, board members have not spoken on behalf of the administration. Board Chairwoman Lisa Estep declined to say if the board or she herself still had faith in the administration.

According to the joint statement:

This week our community was shaken once again by the predatory actions and what appears to be a subsequent coverup within New Hanover County Schools. The most recent report follows the arrest and criminal charges and investigation of Peter Michael Frank, a band teacher at Roland Grise Middle School. Peter Frank has been a teacher with the district since 1997 and has been the subject of numerous complaints and investigations during his tenure with the school system. Those investigations of complaints were handled in such a manner that he was afforded the opportunity to continue to prey on the impressionable youth of our community for decades.

The statement goes on to ask the media and public to respect the privacy of victims. It also reminds victims that under a new law, signed late last year, "the statute of limitations is extended from 21 years of age to 28. It also allows for a revival of stale claims through December 31, 2021, regardless of when the assault occurred. We encourage anyone who was a victim of sexual assault to avoid delay in holding their abuser(s) accountable. "

The statement suggested two resources for victims:

- National Sexual Assault Hotline, tel.: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673). This group connects victims of sexual assaults to sexual assault service providers in their community.
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, tel. : 1-800-273-8255. This group provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources.

NHCS continues to ask any with information about potential abuse to reach out to the school administration, law enforcement, or NHCS's [online and anonymous complaint portal](#). The New Hanover County Sheriff's Office has also created a dedicated phone line for the Frank investigation (910-798-4399).

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