



Three plaintiffs added to lawsuit against New Hanover County Schools

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Victims of Michael Kelly continue to come forward in class action complaint

WILMINGTON — Three additional victims have joined a lawsuit filed last week against New Hanover County Schools over former teacher Michael Kelly's sexual assaults.

The new plaintiffs, ranging in ages from 17 to 23, allege Kelly engaged in sexually inappropriate discussions and conduct with them, including one with whom Kelly performed a sexual act while videotaping it.

The three victims brings the total number of plaintiffs to six from the class action complaint, filed by attorneys from the Lea/Schultz and Rhine law firms on July 23rd. The suit is against the New Hanover County Board of Education, Kelly, former deputy superintendent Rick Holliday and Superintendent Tim Markley. It is also against Mike Roes 1 to 10, which according to the complaint, is being used until certain individuals can be named.

By filing a class action suit, the law firms have opened the door for additional plaintiffs to sign on.

School spokeswoman Valita Quattlebaum sent the following statement to StarNews when asked about the addition of three more plaintiffs to the suit: "The district will not have a statement about the lawsuit at this time."

Board Chair Lisa Estep issued a statement last week on behalf of the board on the pending litigation two days after the lawsuit was filed.

"While it is not appropriate to comment specifically on pending litigation, the Board takes all allegations of this nature seriously. The Board will file a response to the Complaint at the appropriate time. The Board expresses sympathy for any student who may have been harmed by Michael Kelly," Estep's statement read.

Attorney Joel Rhine responded to the board's statement in a release.

"Make no mistake about it. Once again, the Board has missed the point. Just like the students of Richard Priode and other instructors dating back to the late 1990s, these students were permanently harmed by Kelly's actions and by the complicity of the Board and school officials. There is nothing imaginary or suspect about their injuries."

Both Rhine and attorney Jim Lea of Lea/Schultz Law Firm said in their release that the course of litigation will determine the Board's liability for Kelly's past actions, to which he plead guilty to 59 charges related to child sexual abuse on June 25. He was arrested in February 2018 following a joint investigation by the New Hanover County Sheriff's Office and the FBI.

Investigators found that Kelly had abused nearly 20 victims during his years as a teacher. Kelly was sentenced to between 17.6 and 31.8 years in prison.

“There are many students and victims who remain in our schools, particularly at Isaac Bear who have not come forward,” Lea said in the release. “They are hiding behind anonymity to prevent their parents and friends from learning what happened to them. They hide in fear of shame and humiliation and need assistance in identifying safe alternatives for them to talk about what happened. As parents, we all should be demanding that our Board take better care of its students than be concerned about issuing a statement drafted by its lawyers to prevent admission of wrongdoing.”

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