



\$35M lawsuit claims bullying by teachers

By BILL HENRY, QMI AGENCY
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OWEN SOUND, Ont. - Four families who say their children were bullied and abused by teachers at local schools -- and in one case also by students -- have filed multimillion dollar lawsuits.

The similar statements of claim, for a total of \$35 million in damages, were all filed Aug. 4 at Ontario Superior Court in Owen Sound, located 150 northwest of Toronto. They allege the four students were repeatedly harassed, tormented and physically and emotionally abused.

Each child and each set of parents is claiming more than \$4 million in total damages against each defendant.

QMI Agency has chosen not to publish the names of the students, teachers, board officials and others named in the suits to protect the alleged victims.

The allegations date back to the 2007 school year at Holland-Chatsworth school, 2008 at Hanover Heights school, and 2009 at St. Vincent-Euphrasia in Meaford.

A spokesperson reached Thursday said the board could not comment "because we're in a legal position."

The suits name as defendants five teachers, one vice-principal, three school principals and the Bluewater District School Board, along with two students and their parents. They all allege board officials initially ignored parents concerns about the abuse, then neglected to monitor the situations and discipline those responsible for it.

One claim alleges abusive acts from a teacher at the Hanover school included reprimanding the student "in an embarrassing manner and tone in front of her classmates, pushing her face into the water fountain which resulted in a chipped tooth, made fun of the plaintiff's educational efforts in assignments and tasks, violently ripping apart (her) work in front of her classmates, refusing to clarify assignments, name calling and more."

The other claims are similar.

At Holland-Chatsworth, two families allege similar treatment by two teachers, again claiming the women embarrassed their children, made fun of educational efforts, ripped up their school work in front of other students along with "name calling, physical force and more."

One claim alleges a teacher yanked a girl's hair by the ponytail.

Each claim alleges the teachers and school principals were aware of the bullying but did not implement measures promised to prevent further abuse, and "did not escalate this issue to their superiors."

One of the Holland-Chatsworth students was moved to a Catholic school and has thrived since, one claim said. Her "grades have vastly improved because this school has provided her with a safe, secure and stable environment that will help and has helped improve her self esteem and increasing her confidence."

None of the allegations have been heard or proved in court.

Toronto lawyer Sandra Zisckind, who represents all four families, said the allegations and the claims for damages are deliberately "broad and all encompassing" with specific details expected to follow during the cases' fact finding stage.

Zisckind said in some cases the families have spent years meeting repeatedly with board officials with no resolution. They finally decided on litigation as a last resort.

"The parents were very clear that they wanted to make a point," she said. "You can't get reform without attention, and it's just unfortunate that they had to resort to the legal system."

Each family is claiming \$2 million in damages for psychological injury to their child, another \$2 million for medical, educational and other costs and expenses, and the same for each set of parents, as well as \$250,000 damages under the Family Law Act for lost parental and sibling care, guidance and companionship as a result of the alleged bullying and abuse.

Each claim alleges the child victim "has developed acute post-traumatic stress disorder, severe depression, severe loss of self-esteem and confidence ... has been treated by pediatric psychiatrists and psychologists and will continue to require ongoing counselling, treatments and medication for an indefinite period of time."

The claims all say the children continue "to experience violent thoughts and behaviour patterns, nightmares, trouble getting out of bed ... angry outbursts, extreme anxiety and overall extreme changes in mood and depression."

It also says the parents have suffered "tension in the home, extreme exhaustion in dealing with (their child's) behaviour, sadness, frustration, anger, despair and depression."

Zisckind said the claims are about justice, not money.

"These are parents concerned about their kids, trying to get justice for their children. The money is secondary to their children's well being and their frustration in dealing with a board that is refusing to take them seriously."