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EDUCATION

Winslow Township school district settles sexual abuse lawsuit against a teacher for $6 million

It is believed to be the largest civil settlement by a public school district in New Jersey since the state passed a law in 2019 that extended the statute of limitations.

File: The Winslow Township School district has reached settlements for $6 million in two separate lawsuits filed by former students who say they were sexually abused by a former high school teacher. Eacl ... **Read more**

Tom Gralish / Staff Photographer

by Melanie Burney
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Winslow Township Schools has reached a $6 million settlement with two former students who alleged they were sexually assaulted for years by a former high school teacher who plied them with money and fancy restaurant outings.

It is believed to be the largest civil settlement by a public school district in New Jersey since the state passed a law in 2019 that extended the statute of limitations to allow victims of child sexual abuse to sue their abusers up until they turn 55.

“These are important settlements,” said John Baldante, a Haddonfield attorney representing both victims who will receive $3 million each in a structured settlement. “These victims of child sex abuse now have a voice.”

Former Edgewood High School students Michael Delguercio and Matthew Grossman, who filed separate civil lawsuits in 2021, said they were relieved that the case has been resolved. They wanted to share their stories to encourage other sex abuse victims to consider coming forward.

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“I feel like I’m not walking around with a burden anymore,” said Delguercio, 44, of Atco. “I have a feeling of freedom that has come with being fully honest about this. I don’t blame myself. I was a kid.”

Delguercio and Grossman filed lawsuits weeks apart alleging they were assaulted by Nicholas Zaccaria, a social studies and history teacher at Edgewood, now known as Winslow Township High School, between 1998 and 2003. Zaccaria was also a theater adviser, and the teens participated in the stage crew club.

Both men said they were too traumatized to come forward until recently. The statute of limitations had expired to pursue criminal charges, so they filed civil lawsuits.

Both men alleged they were targeted by Zaccaria for sex abuse, according to their lawsuits. They said Zaccaria, known as “Mr Z.” by students, took them separately to dinner at steak houses and Italian restaurants. They said Zaccaria, a popular teacher, gave them money from the stage crew’s petty cash account.

According to the lawsuits, “Zaccaria emotionally manipulated and habitually touched, kissed, and sexually abused students in the school and on school property. His inappropriate and alarming behavior included overt and inconspicuous activities with vulnerable children as part of his grooming, manipulation, and normalization of such inappropriate behavior.”

Reached at his Clementon home, Zaccaria, 75, declined to comment.

Delguercio said he knew Grossman when they were students, but was unaware that Grossman suffered similar abuses. The two were reconnected by mutual friends after filing lawsuits against the district and Zaccaria.

“I never told anybody until I talked to the lawyer. For 20 years I kept it to myself,” said Grossman, 39. “It takes a lifetime to learn that you need to be

brave.”

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The Winslow school board approved the settlements in December, without any admission of liability. Superintendent H. Major Poteat declined to comment, noting that the alleged incidents occurred before his tenure as school chief. Matthew J. Behr, a Mount Laurel lawyer who represented the district, declined to comment as well.

The lawsuit also named as defendants the Lower Camden County Regional School District, which was dissolved in 2001. It accused the district of negligence and failing to protect the students.

More than 500 cases have been filed

New Jersey is among about a dozen states that have adopted laws making it easier for child sexual abuse victims to seek justice in civil court years after the abuse occurred. A bill that would implement similar changes in Pennsylvania has stalled in the state legislature.

Baldante said the New Jersey Child Victims Act changed the legal trajectory because victims are often unable to disclose the trauma they experienced until an older age. Previously, the laws required them to report the abuse by a certain age to file a civil action, he said.

Since the law was passed, Baldante said his firm has filed more than 500 civil cases on behalf of child sex abuse victims involving public and private schools and the Roman Catholic Church. This is the first big settlement that has been publicly disclosed, he said.

It is estimated that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys in New Jersey experience some form of sexual abuse before age 18. But most of the abuse goes unreported, according to the state.

Baldante said his clients struggled with drug use as a result of the abuse and underwent therapy. Delguercio, who recently retired as an English teacher, said dealing with the trauma was “destroying me” until he came forward.

“I feel like me again. I’m able to feel a sense of peace and love,” Delguercio said.

Grossman, of Atco, a landscaper, said he was moved to act when his 6-year-old daughter started school. He worried that something similar could happen to her.

“I don’t need the recognition. I want people to be safe, especially when they go to school,” Grossman said.

A similar case is also unfolding

A former Camden school district student filed a similar civil lawsuit in 2021 alleging Board Advisory President Wasim Muhammad sexually abused her when he was her social studies teacher starting in 1994. The case is pending in Superior Court in Camden County.

The former student, named Jane Doe in the lawsuit to keep her identity confidential, has accused Muhammad, now a minister and prominent community activist, of grooming her for abuse by singling her out for special attention. The alleged abuse began when the girl was 14 and Muhammad was known as Donnie Walker. The lawsuit alleges that district employees who knew about the abuse failed to stop it.

An arbitrator recommended a $1 million settlement, with Muhammad responsible for paying 60%. All parties rejected the recommendation. A settlement conference is scheduled for Feb. 20.

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If a settlement is not reached, a March 11 trial date has been set. The district has spent nearly $65,000 in legal fees defending the case, according to documents obtained by The Inquirer under the New Jersey Open Public Records Act.

Muhammad's lawyer, Troy Archie, has maintained that the allegations against Muhammad are "a frivolous and meritless case lacking legitimate facts." Muhammad took a leave of absence from his board advisory position in January after Gov. Phil Murphy called for his resignation.

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