

Source: Times Beacon Record Newspapers

School board poised to vote on Leonardi settlement

By Arlene Gross

July 24, 2008

In what appears to be an end to an almost year-long lawsuit, lawyers for high school Principal Carmela Leonardi and the Huntington school board have reached an accord.

Come September, she'll be back again helming the high school at \$164,725 salary, albeit somewhat richer for the alleged violations of her rights, her attorney said.

"She's going back in September and plans on being there for many years, protecting the rights of all the students of Huntington High School," her lawyer Steven Morelli, of the Carle Place firm of Leeds, Morelli and Brown, said.

Before their settlement is finalized, however, the school board must approve the agreement for an undisclosed sum.

Trustee Bill Dwyer, the board's new president, and former President Rich McGrath both declined to comment.

Rondiene Novitz, the lawyer representing the school district in the matter, affirmed the confidential nature of the settlement. "The parties have reached an amicable resolution of the matter and they're interested in moving forward toward their common goal of providing an exemplary education to the students of Huntington," said Novitz, from the Melville firm of Cruser, Mitchell and Novitz.

Speaking on behalf of Leonardi, Morelli said, "The matter came up for conference. Both sides wanted the matter resolved. The matter has been tentatively resolved subject to the approval of the board."

When questioned further, he added, "It's a confidential settlement that I don't think any party should be speaking about."

He said that Leonardi is pleased with the outcome. "She did this primarily for the children of the Huntington school district," he said.

The suit, filed on Aug. 16, 2007 in Federal Court, Eastern District, named the board's president at the time, Richard McGrath, vice president, Robert Lee, and Superintendent John Finello as defendants, alleging that they violated plaintiff Leonardi's First Amendment right to free speech and 14th Amendment right to equal protection.

There was no counter claim filed by the board.

Leonardi served more than 16 years in the district, first as principal of Woodhull Early Childhood Center and Huntington Elementary School and later in its new incarnation, Huntington Intermediate, before taking the leadership post at the high school. The complaint states that Leonardi had often advocated on behalf of disadvantaged students. At Woodhull, it states, she recognized that many kindergarten students had been placed in special education classes but were not impaired, merely limited in their use of the English language.

Returning those students into the mainstream, Leonardi provided them with the English language classes they required,

reducing the special education classes from three to one the following year at Woodhull.

The three named defendants, the claim alleges, "began to implement a preconceived scheme designed to remove [the] plaintiff from her position. As it unfolded, this scheme involved gratuitous criticism and evaluations, removal of job duties and responsibilities and a deliberate effort to undermine [the] plaintiff's authority among school personnel."

The defendants' contempt for the plaintiff, they said, was magnified again after a Jan. 29, 2007 board meeting

where Leonardi provided translation for Spanish-speaking parents in the audience. The next day, the claim states, "Finello presented plaintiff with an overly critical and unwarranted performance evaluation and critique. This evaluation stood in stark contrast to the generally favorable evaluations plaintiff had received during her previous ... years in the district and throughout her career."

It appears that the final straw was the Hobson's choice with which she was presented on March 21: she could accept a transfer to preside over the alternative high school — an after-school program for 30 students with special academic needs — or face disciplinary charges. Until then, the alternative high school had never had a full time principal.

Citing a loss of earnings, benefits and reputation, along with great pain, mental anguish and physical injury, the lawsuit stated that Leonardi was entitled to compensatory damages, punitive damages, equitable relief — including reassignment to the principal position at Huntington High School — and any other damages or remedies permissible under law.

Leonardi was granted equitable relief immediately; soon after she filed the lawsuit, the board dropped the transfer negotiations and she remained in her position.