

# Mother says district to blame for child abuse

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2007

By JOHN ROCHE

A lawsuit recently filed against the Bedford Central School District, the former principal of Bedford Hills Elementary School, and the school's guidance counselor claims school officials failed to report allegations that a student was sexually abused in her home, allowing the girl to be molested for eight more months.

The litigation, filed in New York State Supreme Court late last month, was filed on behalf of the alleged victim and her mother. The girl was nine at the time the abuse, and school officials' failure to report it, allegedly took place.

Attorneys representing both sides in the case had strong words about the lawsuit, which seeks unspecified damages for the mother and the girl, who suffered "severe and serious personal injuries," both physically and mentally, because school offi-

cial failed to report the allegations of sexual abuse to authorities when they learned of them in December 2005, according to the six-page document.

"Bedford school officials learned of the abuse to my client and failed to report it to anyone from December to August," said Nancy Morgan, the attorney for the mother and daughter. "They did not even tell the student's mother. If they had notified the mother in December, this young child would not have been abused in January, February, March, April, May, June, and July. They improperly chose to investigate internally in clear violation of the law."

But Dennis O'Connor, the attorney representing the Bedford Central School District, defended the district and the two staff mem-

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# Mom says district failures led to abuse

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bers named in the suit. "The school district and its employees lived up to all their obligations in the care and supervision of the child when she was at school," Mr. O'Connor said, noting that any alleged molestation of the child took place in the family's home, not at school. "I'd suspect that the mother, of all people, was in the best position to know about what was going on in her home."

Ms. Morgan, an attorney with Finkelstein and Partners, blasted any claim that the mother should be blamed for not knowing the abuse was taking place, pointing out that the girl's mother immediately contacted police when she learned of the alleged abuse after seeing lewd photos on the cell phone of her former boyfriend, who is being sought in connection with the repeated attacks on the girl.

"The mother learned of the criminal behavior in August 2006 and immediately contacted the authorities," Ms. Morgan said this week. "The school learned of the abuse the prior December and did nothing. For the school to suggest they acted in accordance with the law is ludicrous. Their student was abused. They were notified by an adult of this abuse. The school's attorney must be aware of the law that requires his client to report abuse."

Mr. O'Connor said that "reasonable suspicion" on the part of the district and its staff in regard to allegations that the girl was molested by her mother's boyfriend is the "heart of this case."

"The school did not know nor did they have reasonable suspicion to believe there was any child abuse

taking place in the home," said Mr. O'Connor, a partner in the White Plains firm O'Connor, McGuinness, Conte, Doyle and Oleson.

The lawsuit names as defendants the district as well as Victoria Graboski, the former principal of Bedford Hills Elementary School, and Kelly Cieslinski-Schluter, the school's former psychologist.

The allegations of abuse initially surfaced when the girl told friends at a playground that she had sex with an adult. After some of those girls discussed that claim at a slumber party soon after, one parent reportedly shared what she heard with Ms. Graboski.

Ms. Graboski and lawyers representing her have previously stated that she didn't learn about the possible abuse directly from the child, the child's parent or legal guardian, and therefore did not break the child abuse reporting law she was charged with violating.

Ms. Graboski, who was arrested last September by Bedford police on a misdemeanor charge of failing to report suspected child abuse, was fired from her job as principal. In December, she was rehired by the district as a special education teacher at Fox Lane High School. That same month, she agreed to take part in an outreach program to edu-

cate the public about reporting suspected child abuse as part of a deal to have the criminal charge against her dropped. She also agreed to participate in educational seminars about reporting child abuse, and the criminal case against her was adjourned until May 24. If she shows the court that she completed the seminars by that date next month, the charge will be dropped.

Ms. Cieslinski-Schluter was one of six educators, including Ms. Graboski, who were placed on paid leave while the district investigated whether proper actions were taken to report abuse if faculty members were in fact made aware of them, as well as if measures were taken to protect the student. While some of the teachers were reassigned within the district in the wake of the investigation, Ms. Cieslinski-Schluter, along with another educator, resigned from her position in November.

The suspensions and other actions taken by the Bedford Central School District and its board of education were publicly criticized by the teachers' union, which announced a "no confidence" vote in the board last fall. In November, the district's teachers' union president, Adam Yuro, flanked by over 50 teachers, criticized the board for using the six

educators as "scapegoats." Mr. Yuro added: "Every one of these teachers would have done anything in their power if they believed a child was in harm's way."

Mr. O'Connor said that while he plans to "vigorously defend this case in the courts, not in the press," he reiterated that the mother of the girl was in the "best position of anyone" to know of the alleged abuse.

"The girl, the man who is accused of abusing her, Cesar Joel Sagastume-Morales, the girl's younger sibling, who is reportedly the biological child of Mr. Sagastume-Morales, and the mother who filed this lawsuit all lived in the same apartment where the abuse is alleged to have occurred," the district's lawyer said. "The district, the school, and staff did not have any real or credible evidence, nor did they have reasonable suspicion, to believe there was any abuse of this child taking place."

Mr. Sagastume-Morales, 28, a laborer from Bedford Hills, is still being sought on a felony charge of sexual conduct against a child by the Bedford police and the Westchester County district attorney's office.

Ms. Morgan said she looks forward to fully presenting her clients' suit in court. The case, which garnered widespread media attention this past year following Ms. Graboski's arrest and subsequent removal as principal, is unique, according to the plaintiffs' attorney. "Although I have several cases relating to the abuse of students, I am not aware of any other case whereby the school simply ignored the law and failed to report abuse," Ms. Morgan said.

*'The school district and its employees lived up to all their obligations in the care and supervision of the child when she was at school.'*

— DENNIS O'CONNOR, ATTORNEY,  
BEDFORD CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

June 6 2007

# District addresses abuse reporting

By JOHN ROCHE

The Bedford Central School District board of education is expected to vote this week on a new policy regarding child abuse reporting, a subject that caused controversy in the district last year when a principal and five other educators were disciplined for how a report of alleged sexual abuse of a child in her home was handled.

The child abuse reporting policy has undergone two readings at Bedford Central school board meetings, with a third reading and probable vote expected at the board's next meeting on June 13. In addition to considering the policy, which was drafted by an outside law firm and the district's policy committee, the board also directed district

superintendent Dr. Debra Jackson to develop administrative regulations to accomplish the intent of the policy. The superintendent is also directed via the policy to implement an ongoing training program for "mandated reporters" — namely faculty and staff required by law to report abuse — in

the district under education law, which at a minimum will consist of an annual faculty meeting.

Bedford Central school board president Brad Sacks said he believes that a clear policy should be in place for district staff, and anticipates that the board will vote on the proposed policy at this week's meeting. "It's important that there is a definitive record of who a mandated reporter is and exactly what their responsibilities are should

they come into contact with information regarding the well-being of a child," Mr. Sacks said.

The draft of the policy has two main components, one about the reporting of suspected child abuse in a domestic setting, and one about reporting abuse in an educa-

tional setting. Reporting suspected abuse in the home is governed by social services law, and reporting suspected abuse in a school setting is governed by educational law, the draft policy explains. It also distinguishes between the distinct requirements for

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*The superintendent is directed via the policy to implement an ongoing training program for 'mandated reporters.'*

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# A new 'Bob' takes reins, for a while at least

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and he looks to get out from behind his desk when he can.

"I like to involve myself in the goings-on in the schools, so whenever I can I find my way into the schools I do," he said. "I don't interfere with the goings-on in the schools, but I keep in touch with the building principals, who are my primary contact in the schools." He said he expects them to do their work, and he said that he expects to support them as they do their work.

Dr. Roelle said that he was familiar with controversies in the Katonah-Lewisboro district, both among board members and between the board and the public. "We are close enough here as neighbors, and both Katonah-Lewisboro and Ossining are members of the Putnam Northern Westchester BOCES, and for that reason superintendents gather at least once a month, and I know the current superintendent, Dr. Lichtenfeld, and to a lesser degree I know the deputy superintendent, Karen Benedict," he said. "I am looking forward to working with the Katonah-Lewisboro board of education, its administrators, and staff."

Dr. Roelle recognizes that his position is interim and considers preparing the board and the district for the next permanent superintendent an important part of his job. A part of that preparation would be to help close the gaps between the communi-

ty and the school board and between the community and the administration.

"I would welcome the challenge to bring people together to reflect upon the fine school district that Katonah-Lewisboro is," he said.

Demographics are clearly different between the Ossining district and Katonah-Lewisboro, but Dr. Roelle does not see that difference as meaningful.

"What is very clear is that the needs of students and staff tends to be the same no matter where you go," he said. "There are students with a wide range of abilities, and it is the job of any school system to make sure it operates for the abilities of the children. We have had many successes in Ossining that would parallel the successes of the high-performing students in the Katonah-Lewisboro school system."

He said that the diverse needs of school populations require that the superintendent act for all the students and not just for those who excel. He said it is important to work with parents of all groups and all staff and satisfy learning needs.

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He considers himself an educational leader who doesn't find his way into the classroom often, but he is active in participating in the development of learning programs.

"When I made the decision to retire, it was my hope that I would continue somehow either directly, as I will be in a public school setting, or in an atmosphere where I would be working in collaboration with public schools at the university level or in some other capacity," said Dr. Roelle. "It turned out that the opportunity in Westchester County was a good opportunity."

He had heard about the result of the investigation conducted by the New York State comptroller's office that uncovered wrongdoing. He said the superintendent's job is to be the CEO of the entire school district. "That doesn't mean you have expertise in every area, but I have substantial experience after operating a school district here for the past 15 years with a budget over \$90 million, and I have experience overseeing the fiscal aspects as well."

He said that the Ossining School District recently went through a state

audit and "it wasn't perfect, but given the nature of those audits, I would say it was an excellent audit."

Mr. Breslin said that the sense of the board was that Dr. Roelle was the right fit because all the board members were comfortable on a personal level. "We can see him stepping into the job on day one and running the district effectively," he said. "He has the right style and the right skills to do the best job for Katonah-Lewisboro."

Mr. Breslin said Dr. Roelle's management style is different from the management style of Dr. Lichtenfeld and Mr. Breslin said the board is willing to try a different management style for at least a year, the term of Dr. Roelle's contract.

"When you are hiring an interim superintendent, you are going to have a different set of goals than you would for a long-term superintendent," he said. "You need to hire someone that we would be comfortable with to accomplish our year goals."

A short-term goal would be continued restructuring of the business office that needs to come to completion. Another goal is to develop a system of effective communication among the board, superintendent staff, and community.

"Communications is something that clearly needs to work on," said Dr. Breslin. "We look forward to accomplishing all our short-term goals."

June 15 2007

# Superintendent to leave district three years early

By JOHN ROCHE

A special Bedford Central Board of Education meeting on Monday lasted less than a minute, but its result will have a lasting impact on the district.

In a quick but dramatic 5-1 vote on June 12, the board accepted the resignation of superintendent of schools Dr. Debra Jackson, although she'll continue to lead the district until June 30, 2008.

Citing a confidentiality clause as part of the agreement regarding Dr. Jackson's resignation, neither she nor members of the board would discuss the superintendent's departure, including the reason behind her resignation or why it won't take effect until next year.

"We can't discuss any details other than what the resolution states and the statement we released," said school board president Brad Sacks, following the brief meeting this week at the district's central administration offices.

Mr. Sacks, who will step down as

one of the seven trustees on the board this June 30 after deciding not to seek re-election, voted in favor of the resolution authorizing the board to enter "a certain agreement" between the board of education and Dr. Jackson, and also accepting her resignation effective just over a year from now.

Marc Vandenhoeck cast the sole vote opposing the resolution, which Susan Elion Wollin, Donna Marino, Barbara Grossman, and Eric Karle voted to approve. Trustee Mark Chernis could not attend the meeting because of a scheduling conflict.

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— BOARD PRESIDENT BRAD SACKS

A brief, joint statement released following the 59-seconds-long meeting states that Dr. Jackson, who began her tenure as Bedford Central superintendent on July 1, 2004, will resign effective June 30, 2008, thus terminating the last three years of a five-year contract granted in 2006.

"While Dr. Jackson was fully prepared to serve out her entire con-

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# Jackson announces surprise resignation

Continued from page 1

act, she and the board of education have agreed that the separation is in the mutual interest of both parties," the statement reads.

The three-paragraph release further states: "The superintendent of schools and the board of education shared that they will work together to ensure a smooth transition during the upcoming school year."

Dr. Jackson is also quoted in the statement, saying: "The district's long range goals will continue to be addressed during the transition year. I look forward to continuing to work with the schools and the community."

*Her three-year tenure leading the high school, middle school, and five elementary schools that compose Bedford Central has been marked by successes, but also at times marred by controversy.*



SCOTT MULLIN PHOTO

**Debra Jackson resigned this week as superintendent of the Bedford Central School District, but will continue to serve through June 2008.**

district staff and parents based on her leadership capabilities and her more than 26 years as a teacher and administrator in public schools.

Dr. Dennis described Dr. Jackson in 2004 as "an educator with strong, impressive credentials and an exceptional track record." The board president at the time, Elin Sullivan, said upon her hiring that "Dr. Jackson has the capacity and energy to take Bedford Central to the next level."

Her three-year tenure leading the

to report abuse if faculty members were in fact made aware of them, as well as if measures were taken to protect the student.

Ms. Graboski was fired from her job as principal, but later rehired by the district as a special education teacher at Fox Lane High School. While some of the teachers were reassigned within the district in the wake of the investigation, two of the educators resigned from their positions last November.

The suspensions and other actions taken by the district and its board were publicly criticized by the teachers union, which announced a "no confidence" vote in the board last fall. The teachers association president charged that the six staffers were used as "scapegoats" by the district and its board.

A protracted negotiation process for a new teachers union contract also took place during Dr. Jackson's tenure, with teachers in Bedford Central working for a year and seven months without a contract. Teachers twice staged protests on the Fox Lane campus during the contract impasse, claiming that there was low morale among students and criticizing district administrators for being "out of touch."

Although Dr. Jackson could not comment further on her resignation because of the confidentiality agreement, perhaps her sentiment regarding her time at Bedford Central, as well as her feelings about the district and its students, could be culled from a portion of her address to the 2006 graduation class of Fox Lane High School as you go forth into the world beyond

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The meeting consisted of the read-  
 ing of the resolution, a motion to  
 approve it, a second to that motion,  
 and a vote by a show of hands. In  
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The district's student enrollment greatly expanded under Dr. Jackson, including a 25 percent rise at the middle school level and a more than 30 percent jump at the high school level. Major construction and renovation projects were completed or started throughout the district, including a new building at Fox Lane High School, with Dr. Jackson at the helm. Additionally under Dr. Jackson's leadership, programming was bolstered in the district, including the implementation of a gifted program.

But also under Dr. Jackson's watch, a controversy occurred at Bedford Hills Elementary School (BHE) stemming from allegations of sexual abuse by a family friend at her home. The allegations of abuse involved a girl who was a friend of the girl's mother. When the girl's mother learned of the allegations, she contacted the principal at BHE, Ms. Victoria Graboski, and the principal at BHE, Ms. Victoria Graboski, shared what she knew with the principal at BHE.

Ms. Victoria Graboski, principal at BHE, paid leave while the district investigated whether proper actions were taken.

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Although Dr. Jackson could not comment further on her resignation because of the confidentiality agreement, perhaps her sentiments regarding her time at Bedford Central, as well as her feelings about the district and its students, could be culled from a portion of her address to the 2006 graduating class of Fox Lane High School. "As you go forth into the world beyond these familiar hallways, trust that it is not necessarily the moments of success that count," Dr. Jackson said at last year's commencement. "There will be such moments, but remember that your contributions to the world will arise as much from your anonymous, daily actions towards those around you as it will from your big accomplishments and discoveries."

Mr. Sacks said the board of education has not yet made a decision regarding the details of a search for a new superintendent. "The board will be considering how to proceed and weighing its options in terms of when and how a search for a new superintendent of schools will be handled in the upcoming transition year," he said.

# Questions erupt <sup>2007</sup> after surprise Jackson buyout

June  
22 2007

By JOHN ROCHE

As further details emerged about the separation agreement between superintendent Dr. Debra Jackson and the Bedford Central School District — including the fact that she'll be paid more than \$650,000 plus health benefits for life on top of another year's salary — some observers blasted both the deal and the district's board of education for agreeing to it.

Dr. Jackson, as first reported in *The Record-Review* last week, submitted her resignation on June 11, although it won't take effect until June 30, 2008. According to a 20-page agreement outlining the details of her departure, howev-

er, Dr. Jackson will receive a lump sum payment of \$650,000 by the end of this month, compensating her for lost salary for the remaining three years of a five-year contract extension signed in 2006, as well as benefits and credited service for retirement benefits.

Although the superintendent and board members declined to comment due to a confidentiality clause in the agreement, a longtime critic of

the district blasted the agreement this week, and called on the board of education to explain its actions to parents and other taxpayers in the district, who will foot the bill for Dr. Jackson's departure.

"This is an abuse of the taxpayers' money, and board members need to be held accountable," said Phil Christe, a Mount Kisco businessman and a frequent critic of the district's practices. "This isn't Monopoly money, and the fact that taxpayers in the district are paying for this sweetheart departure package entitles taxpayers to some answers as to why this deal was struck."

At a meeting on Monday, June 11, the board voted to accept the resignation of Dr. Jackson, although it won't be effective until next June. Both the superintendent and members of the board declined to comment on the resignation, other than to point to a brief joint statement issued by Dr. Jackson and the board.

Brad Sacks, the outgoing president of the board, and Dr. Jackson said that due to a confidentiality clause,

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accountable.'*

— PHIL CHRISTE,  
MOUNT KISCO

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# Resignations after Debra Jackson resignation

page 1  
to discuss the reasons for the resignation, as well as how long they will remain at the district for another 12 months and others this time. The board for not they sought to end Dr. Jackson's tenure in the district, July 2004, as well as how she will be compensated. Her \$243,461 salary for the year, and lifetime retirement benefits for the superintendent and her private corporation — they, and an incredible amount of it, and therefore it will be fully distributed, said claiming this is coming from a undesignated fund the 2006-07 budget. Two parties say that individual doesn't

mean it's so. There is clear precedence in the law that this agreement does not fall under what can be kept confidential, since we're talking about public figures and money coming from a budget that voters approve and taxpayers pay into. The public has a right to know what it is paying for and why.  
According to the agreement, obtained this week through the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL), Dr. Jackson's resignation stems from a certain dispute [which] has arisen between the superintendent and the board of education with regard to the superintendent's performance of her duties.  
The agreement states that although the board wanted to terminate her, Dr. Jackson claimed that there was no valid reason to terminate her contract, and if fired, would pursue legal action for direct and consequential damages for breach of contract. The agreement goes on to state that the dispute would have

likely resulted in protracted and expensive litigation which would not be in the interest of either party or in the interest of the school district, its students, staff and taxpayers.  
Mr. Christie said that the board is obligated to disclose the circumstances surrounding Dr. Jackson's resignation, and said if board members refuse to do so, they should step down. "What it comes down to is if [Dr. Jackson] is no good or did something so terribly wrong, then fire her," he said. "It in no way should be if she failed to do her job or did something wrong, then we'll let you run the district for another year and pay you a hefty, hefty sum on your way out as well. It's ludicrous."  
Dr. Jackson's tenure at Bedford Central has been marked by accomplishments as well as problems. While students at the elementary, middle, and high school levels in the district have consistently performed significantly above the statewide

average on assessment tests and Regents exams, the district faces litigation over its handling of how staff reported allegations of sexual abuse of a student in her home. Also, a protracted negotiation process for a new teachers' union contract also took place during Dr. Jackson's tenure, with teachers in Bedford Central working for a year and seven months without a contract.  
The agreement also calls on Dr. Jackson and the board to "work in a harmonious and respectful manner" in the coming year that she'll remain in her position, and prohibits either the district or Dr. Jackson from seeking litigation against one another now or in the future unless the agreement is breached.  
The board voted 5 to 1 to accept Dr. Jackson's resignation and permit the district to enter into the agreement with her. Marc Vandenberg was the sole vote in opposition and board trustee Mark Chermis was absent for the meeting, which lasted less than a minute.

# Former school board presidents question payout

June 29, 2007

By JOHN ROCHE

Two former presidents of the Bedford Central school board questioned the impact the buyout agreement between the current board and superintendent Dr. Debra Jackson — including a lump sum payment of \$650,000 made this week, a full year before her resignation takes effect — will have on the school district.

Elin Sullivan, who served on the school board for six years starting in 1998, and was board president when Dr. Jackson began her tenure as superintendent of schools in 2004, this week said the deal reached between the board and Dr. Jackson raises serious questions regarding the future of Bedford Central and the financial burden on the district and local taxpayers, calling it “a very costly path to take.”

Another former board president, Mark Slivka, in an e-mailed state-

ment this week, urged the current board of education to go public with the circumstances behind Dr. Jackson's resignation and the reasons the board entered the agreement, which he said will cost the district well over \$1 million.

Dr. Jackson submitted her resignation on June 11, although it won't take effect until June 30, 2008. According to a 20-page agreement outlining the details of her departure, however, Dr. Jackson was to receive \$650,000 this week, compensating her for lost salary for the remaining three years of a five-year contract extension signed in 2006, as well as benefits and credited service for retirement benefits. She will also be paid \$243,461 in salary for the coming year.

The agreement was obtained by The Record-Review through the

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# Sullivan, Slivka question Jackson settlement

Continued from page 1

Information Law  
 other documents that  
 on Dr. Jackson's  
 requested from the  
 under FOIL.

the agreement, Dr.  
 stems from "a  
 which has arisen  
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Bedford Central currently has a self-insured health plan. "Every dollar of health services utilized by Dr. Jackson's family is a dollar of cost to the district," he said. "Dr. Jackson is 52 years old. Until Medicare becomes her primary insurer, the district is left to pay for any and all minor and major ailments. All told, the cost to the district for Dr. Jackson's pending resignation will be over \$1 million."

Both Ms. Sullivan and Mr. Slivka said they are perplexed by the board's actions, especially since the same board extended Dr. Jackson's contract to five years, the maximum allowed by the state, in 2006.

"Obviously, the board was happy with Dr. Jackson's first two years, because they extended his contract last summer," Ms. Sullivan said. "I don't see that she could have done anything too egregious this past year, as they're keeping her around for another year, and her contract does allow for her removal with cause. Maybe the board is correct in now believing that they can do better — I don't know — but this is a very costly path to take."

Mr. Slivka said Dr. Jackson was given the contract extension for the first two years of his position, her work was what when the board decided to extend the contract for principals in

the board uncovered some facts from the first two years that drastically changed their opinion of Dr. Jackson to require her immediate expulsion, it was the board's responsibility to relieve Dr. Jackson no matter the cost. But as Dr. Jackson will continue to be superintendent for another year, this was not the case. So what happened?"

Ms. Sullivan said how the situation was handled poses a threat to the stability, strength, and success of the district in the coming years. "It just seems to me that there are a lot of losers here — the taxpayers, clearly," she said. "The district also suffers from a year of a lame duck superintendent, and who will be willing to sign a contract with Bedford Central now? I mean, it's a sellers' market out there for superintendents, as Katonah-Lewisboro's recent experience should teach us," referring to the fact that the top choice for the superintendent's position in the Katonah-Lewisboro School District recently turned down the district's offer.

Ms. Sullivan said another unfortunate result of the deal is the damage to Dr. Jackson's career.

"And will residents be willing to support future [school district]

budgets after this?" Ms. Sullivan said. "Then there is the damage to the board's own reputation and credibility, especially with this confidentiality clause."

Mr. Slivka said he believes that the special counsel hired by the district this past March to "provide legal services to the board of education in connection with a confidential personnel matter" was aimed at finding charges against Dr. Jackson. "Although Dr. Jackson's name was not mentioned, the timing is too coincidental not to involve Dr. Jackson," Mr. Slivka said regarding the hiring of the special counsel. "But as Dr. Jackson will continue to be superintendent for another year, credible charges were not found."

Because the board and the superintendent remain mum about the resignation and buyout, rumors are rampant in the district, and observers such as Mr. Slivka can only try to piece together what may have occurred.

Mr. Slivka and others were also critical of the timing of the board's actions regarding the superintendent, since the agreement and buyout package were formalized after taxpayers approved the district's \$110.8 million budget in May.



Bedford Central

# Susan Elion Wollin to head board of education

By JOHN ROCHE

Susan Elion Wollin, who has served on the Bedford Central board of education for five years, was elected its president this week, and hopes to lead the board and the district to new heights in the coming year, which looks to be a challenging one.

Ms. Wollin, a 1975 graduate of Fox Lane High School, was elected president of the school board at a reorganizational meeting on July 13. She served as vice president this past year under president Brad Sacks, who opted not to run for reelection to the board after six years.

Although Ms. Wollin said it's premature to comment on possible board goals for the coming year, since the board hasn't met yet to dis-

cuss what it hopes to accomplish, the new president said she plans to keep the district moving in a positive direction.

But with controversy swirling around the district and the board over a buyout package granted in June to superintendent Dr. Debra Jackson, whose mid-contract resignation will take effect July 1, 2008, along with a search for a new superintendent as well as upcoming negotiations with the teachers union and ongoing construction throughout the district, the coming school year could prove to be one of the most challenging periods for the district in its history.

"I think one of the main jobs of a

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July 27  
2007

# Wollin takes the reins of Bedford Central board

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board president is to facilitate meetings and to ensure that communication between the board, the administration, and the entire district is positive and informed," said Ms. Wollin, who with her husband, Marc, a Record-Review columnist, has a son, Dave, entering his senior year at Fox Lane High School, and another son, Matthew, also a product of district schools, entering his junior year at Williams College. "I hope to work with the rest of the board, our administration, faculty, staff, parents, and students to create and foster a collegial and productive work environment that will best educate our kids."

Although board members cite a confidentiality clause in the departure agreement with Dr. Jackson, which included a \$650,000 lump sum payment and health benefits for Dr. Jackson and her family for life, Ms. Wollin said that she and the board will work with the current superintendent for the coming year for the betterment of the district while simultaneously conducting a search for Dr. Jackson's

"As we embark on this new school year, we're going to be looking to provide the vision and inspiration to lead Bedford Central school district into the future by conducting a successful superintendent search, and as articulated in a statement by the board, we intend for that search to be a very open and inclusive process," Ms. Wollin said. "I'm looking forward to doing all that I can to move the district forward in a positive way, and I believe the board joins me in looking forward to communicating with all members of the school community about the issues we're facing."

Ms. Wollin, who grew up in Bedford and whose mother taught middle school math in the district for 20 years, has been active in the district for over a decade. Some of her involvement before and since being elected to the board includes serving on the COMPACT teams at Bedford Village Elementary School and Fox Lane High School, the district's vision, mission, and goals committee, and Bedford Central's Facilities Committee. She was also an integral member of the re-

assistant superintendent's curriculum steering committee, among others.

Her experience, dedication, and broad range of knowledge of Bedford Central and its schools were among the traits that led her board colleague, Dr. Eric Karle, to nominate Ms. Wollin for president. "I've known Susan for 12 years, and know her to be highly ethical, intelligent, articulate, and dedicated," Dr. Karle said. "I've worked with her for the past two years on the board and on various committees, and Susan has proven to be committed and always able to arrive at consensus. I think she'll do a great job as board president."

Ms. Wollin, who owns an executive search firm, said she realizes that board president is "a pretty big job" and credited her predecessors for their efforts on behalf of the district. "I certainly have great respect for Brad Sacks and all the others who previously served as Bedford Central board president," she said. "I certainly recognize all that Brad and our other former presidents did for our district."

In addition to working with Dr. Jackson throughout the coming transi-

tion year and finding a new superintendent, the district will be negotiating with the Bedford Central Teachers Association toward a new contract. "I'd look for that process to be successful for all parties involved," she said.

Another area in which Ms. Wollin said she anticipates a successful conclusion is the ongoing capital repairs and expansion throughout Bedford Central. "Having served on the construction committee since 1999, I'm very excited about the completion of this ambitious construction project, which will hopefully be done by summer 2008," the newly elected president said of the work continuing at Fox Lane High School as well as the elementary schools in Pound Ridge and Mount Kisco.

Ms. Wollin said she hopes that the board will remain responsive not only to the needs of students, staff, and the schools of the district but to parents and other residents as well. "I certainly welcome input from the community, and expect that the board will remain responsive to the community as we work toward making the district the best it can be," she said.

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# A 'certain dispute' remains uncertain

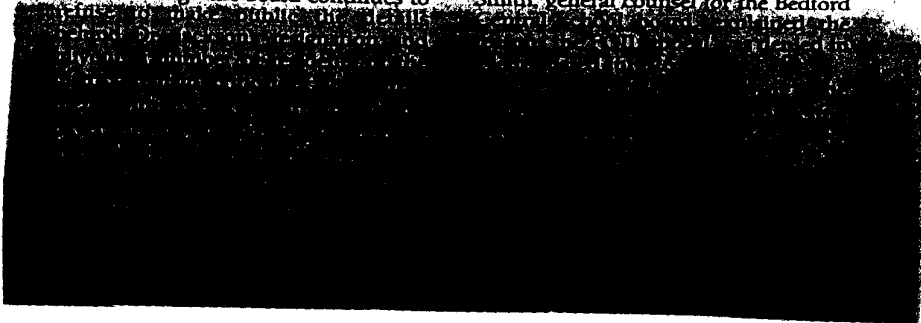
By JOHN ROCHE

The Bedford Central Board of Education this week denied an appeal filed by The Record-Review aimed at uncovering the nature of the "certain dispute" that precipitated the controversial agreement between superintendent Dr. Debra Jackson and the school board under the state Freedom of Information Law (FOIL).

But although the board continues to

FOIL, but a subsequent request for any and all documents relating to the "certain dispute" cited in the agreement as the reason the board sought to terminate Dr. Jackson earlier this year was denied. The Record-Review appealed that denial, which was also shot down this week.

John Gross, an attorney with the Mount Kisco law firm of Ingerman Smith, general counsel for the Bedford





Bedford Central

# Board, Jackson, vow to work together

By JOHN ROCHE

As more than 4,400 students began the new school year at the seven schools in the Bedford Central School District this week, superintendent Dr. Debra Jackson and the board of education's new leadership offered an overview of the coming academic year, pledging to work together despite some unique challenges ahead.

Dr. Jackson, along with Bedford Central board president Susan Eliott Wollin and vice president Donna Marino, discussed some of the goals, objectives, and challenges in the 2007-08 school year, including the fact that a dispute between the superintendent and the board last year prompted Dr. Jackson to tender her mid-contract resignation late last

spring, which will take effect July 1, 2008.

Ms. Wollin described the next 10 months of school as "a transitional year" for the district, alluding to the difficult circumstances of conducting a search for Dr. Jackson's replacement while she's still at the helm of the district as its chief administrator.

"We're committed to moving forward on a positive level this year, and as always, the education of our students is our top priority," said Ms. Wollin, a five-year veteran of the board who was elected its president in July. "We're clearly moving ahead on a search to provide the visionary leadership we feel is necessary for our district."

Ms. Wollin and Dr. Jackson both

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# Board, superintendent, focus on students

ahead with action plans to turn that vision into reality. I think if you asked each principal in our schools, they would say their main goal is to make sure that each and every child has their needs fully met," Dr. Jackson said. "That may sound simple, but it's also challenging."

Another challenge for the district this year is ensuring progress and in some cases, completion, of ongoing capital repairs and expansion throughout Bedford Central, most notably the continuing construction at Fox Lane High School as well as the elementary schools in Pound Ridge and Mount Kisco.

The superintendent and the board leaders said that work on the new science building, the K-Wing section of the high school, is expected to be completed ahead of schedule, with classes moving into the completely renovated building in mid-October. "It's certainly one of the focuses of the board and our administration this year to see that our very ambitious and substantial construction projects are completed on time by the end of summer 2008," Ms. Wollin said. Negotiations with the two major unions in Bedford Central are also on tap this year, since the districts contract with the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA) expired last June, and the contract with the Bedford Teachers Association (BTA) expires this coming spring. "Negotiations with the CSEA are ongoing, and we look forward to setting up a process that will facilitate fair, open, and productive discussions and negotiations with the BTA," Ms. Wollin said.

Ms. Marino said she hopes the excitement of the first week of school carries well into the academic year for everyone in the district. "It's an exciting time," she said.

*The board's paramount obligation is to do what is best for the district's children, and by extension, what is best for our staff and community.*

— SUSAN ELION WOLLIN, BOARD PRESIDENT

ued from page 1  
sed concerns raised by some par-  
at the district, its schools, and its  
s may suffer somewhat by hav-  
superintendent on her way out of  
because of a reported dispute  
the board running the district for  
school year. "We've heard the  
rns from the community, includ-  
me who have used the term 'lame  
regarding the superintendent,"  
Wollin said. "I am highly confident  
the board, the superintendent, all  
administration, faculty, and staff  
work cooperatively in the best  
s of the students of our district."  
e board president added, "We're  
highly confident in the compe-  
; and excellence of our assistant  
rntendents. Our district just got a  
f-the-line audit report from the  
omptroller's office, indicating the  
ent work of Mark Betz as assistant  
rntendent of business and admin-  
ive services. Our other assistant  
rntendents are also doing excel-  
work, Linda Schluter with special  
ation and student services, Bob  
per in human resources, and Ken  
hell overseeing curriculum."

Jackson said she too expects the  
ary focus to be on education,  
r than on her impending depart-  
as the search for a new superin-  
lent is conducted. "The board and I  
ertainly working in tandem to kick  
hat I'm sure will be an outstanding  
of quality education in our dis-  
," said Dr. Jackson, whose depart-  
agreement, which included a  
0,000 cash buyout and health ben-  
for her and her family for life,  
uded a confidentiality clause.  
addressing the district's roughly 500  
lity, staff, and administrators on  
sday, the day before students  
rned, Ms. Wollin, a graduate of Fox

Ms. Wollin. "We value the ideas, opin-  
ions, and concerns of parents and resi-  
dents, and as much as we want to hear  
from the community and be a respon-  
sive and responsible board, we also  
want the community to be informed  
and aware of all that we're doing to  
make our district the best it can be."

Dr. Jackson said that start-of-school  
figures indicate that student registra-  
tion is up in the district, and more than  
50 new staff members were hired dis-  
trictwide this summer. The superin-  
tendent said that administrators, facul-  
ty, and staff are prepared to lead stu-  
dents in a "wonderful year of academic  
learning and personal development."

"We've really been doing a lot of  
work grades K through 12 coordinating  
curriculum," Dr. Jackson said. "We're  
really looking at science through the  
tristate evaluation process K through  
12, and that's really been exciting for all  
of us to be working on. We're continu-  
ing to look at ways of enhancing litera-  
cy, and we've done a tristate review on  
mathematics, so we're in the process of  
getting feedback from outside groups  
on what progress we've made in terms  
of advancing our curriculum."

The superintendent said a new alge-  
bra curriculum is being instituted this  
year, another exciting development in  
advancing the district's aligned curricu-  
lum. "While we look at what we hope  
to accomplish as a district and move

Lane High School who has a son enter-  
ing senior year there, said the board is  
committed to better communicating  
and working with the entire school  
community to make Bedford Central "a  
model of superior educational practice  
and achievement," thanking teachers  
and staffers for the work they do  
toward that end.

"We have learned that the success  
and failure of this district rests on hon-  
est dialogue and a willingness to work  
toward consensus whenever and wher-  
ever possible," Ms. Wollin said. "The  
board's paramount obligation is to do  
what is best for the district's children,  
and by extension, what is best for our  
staff and community."

During the joint interview last week,  
Ms. Marino, a mother of two children  
in the district who has served on the  
board since 2004, joined with Ms.  
Wollin and Dr. Jackson in highlighting  
the district's new Web site, [www.bcsd-ny.org](http://www.bcsd-ny.org), voicing optimism that it will  
lead to greater access, involvement, and  
input on the part of parents and other  
residents throughout the district this  
year.

"We've been working on making our  
district Web site more user-friendly,  
more easily accessible, and as updated  
and timely as possible," Ms. Marino  
said. "Along with that, the board is  
firmly committed to enhancing com-  
munication with the community," said

September 14 2007

## Jackson presided over prior sex abuse case

By JOHN ROCHE

A \$400,000 settlement was paid in a case involving a fifth-grade student sexually abused by her elementary school teacher in 2004, while Dr. Debra Jackson was superintendent of the North Salem Central School District.

Dr. Jackson, who is now superintendent of the Bedford Central School District, was named as a defendant in the civil case that resulted in the settlement, along with the accused teacher, Robert Gordon, and the principal of Pequenakonck Elementary School when the incident occurred, Roberta Reiner.

The settlement was paid in March 2006, two years after the teacher admitted to police that he inappropriately touched the fifth-grade girl

on Feb. 26, 2004. Mr. Gordon was arrested by state troopers later that same day, and later pleaded guilty to sexual abuse in the first degree on Nov. 17, 2004. While Mr. Gordon's conviction and sentencing were reported in the media, the specifics of the settlement were not.

No direct allegations, either criminal or in the civil lawsuit, were made against Dr. Jackson, other than charges by the victim's family in the civil case alleging that officials in the North Salem district and at Pequenakonck Elementary School failed to take proper action when similar allegations were raised against Mr. Gordon by other female students in the past.

The girl, identified in court papers as "Jane Doe" because of her age, and

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her family sued Dr. Jackson, the principal, Ms. Reiner, and the teacher, Mr. Gordon, alleging that the school district "became aware of defendant Gordon's inappropriate behavior at least as far back as 1988 and failed to take any action to stop it prior to Feb. 26, 2004. The school district's failure to stop defendant Gordon's criminal behavior enabled him to make repeated, improper, sexual advances towards Jane Doe ... which culminated in his sexual abuse of her on Feb. 26, 2004."

Three other students claimed that they were also sexually harassed or inappropriately touched by Mr. Gordon, in 1989, 2002, and 2003, according to the court papers, but those allegations were deemed unfounded by school officials.

When he was questioned by a state trooper soon after the incident took place, Mr. Gordon "stated that he had touched the child's breast through her clothing after unzipping the front of her coat," according to the trooper's report. "When asked why he had done this, [Gordon] replied, 'curiosity.'"

This week, as she did when testifying in the civil case, Dr. Jackson said that she never acted improperly in any way. She said she agreed to the settlement on advice of counsel. "I never knew the amount of the settlement, as I think few did, and although I was named in the lawsuit because I was superintendent, I was never made privy to the specifics of the civil case, other

### The district's failure to stop defendant Gordon's criminal behavior enabled him to make repeated, improper, sexual advances towards Jane Doe.

than there was a settlement," Dr. Jackson said. "After the case was handled criminally, the civil case was taken on by the courts, and the insurance company for the district came to an agreement as the final determination."

Dr. Jackson, who became superintendent at Bedford Central July 1, 2004, said the day the incident took place at Pequenaconck Elementary School and when Mr. Gordon was arrested, she was off from her job at North Salem, actually being introduced as the incoming superintendent, to the Bedford Central school community. "Although I wasn't there that day, the district attorney said North Salem staff did an absolutely textbook job of reporting the allegations as soon as they were made, and the state police responded and immediately took action," Dr. Jackson said.

Dr. Jackson, who served as superintendent in North Salem from 1995 to June 2003, said that she and staff reached out to the fifth grader and her family in the wake of the incident. "Any time a child is not completely safe in a school environment, it's cause for concern," she said. "We reached out at the time in various ways."

A Bedford Central school board

member at the time, Mark Slivka, confirmed that Dr. Jackson was forthcoming with the Bedford Central district that she was named in the civil suit, and advised the district that she would have to take time off to testify.

During Dr. Jackson's tenure in Bedford Central, a controversy occurred at Bedford Hills Elementary School (BHES) stemming from allegations that a 9-year-old girl was sexually assaulted by a family friend at the student's home. The allegations of abuse initially surfaced in 2005, when the girl told friends at a playground that she had had sex with an adult. After some of those girls discussed that claim at a slumber party soon after, one parent reportedly shared what she heard with Victoria Graboski, then the principal at BHES.

Six educators, including Ms. Graboski, were placed on paid leave while the district investigated whether proper actions were taken to report abuse if faculty members were in fact made aware of it, as well as if measures were taken to protect the student.

Ms. Graboski was fired from her job as principal, but later rehired by the district as a special education teacher at Fox Lane High School.

In March, a lawsuit was filed against the Bedford Central district, Ms. Graboski, and the school's guidance counselor, alleging that school officials failed to report allegations that the BHES student had been sexually abused in her home, allowing the girl to be molested for eight more months.

That litigation, filed on behalf of the alleged victim and her mother, is still pending.

Dr. Jackson said this week that the incident involving abuse by a teacher in North Salem in 2006 has no relevance to her performance as Bedford Central superintendent. "There's really no connection with this one incident in North Salem and anything regarding my performance as superintendent here in Bedford Central," she said.

Because of a "certain dispute" with the school board last year, Dr. Jackson turned in her resignation in June, but it won't take effect until June 30, 2008. Through an agreement reached with the board, Dr. Jackson, who was given a five-year contract extension in 2006, received a \$650,000 cash buyout and health benefits for her and her family for life. The controversial agreement irked many parents and other community residents because it included a confidentiality clause, effectively barring Dr. Jackson or anyone else in the district from disclosing the details of what precipitated her resignation. The district has denied freedom of information requests and appeals for the rationale for her coming departure.

# Bedford Central seeks public input on top job

By JOHN ROCHE

Having conducted meetings with parents, the community, faculty, staff and students, the firm leading the search for a new superintendent for the Bedford Central School District is expected to present specifications for possible candidates to district's board of education at its next meeting.

Over the past seven weeks, School Leadership LLC, the Manhattan-based firm selected by the board this fall to lead the search for a replacement of outgoing superintendent Dr. Debra Jackson, has sought input from various constituencies in the district to shape the parameters of the superintendent search through focus groups, one-on-one meetings, open forums, individual questionnaires, and other measures.

At the board's public meeting on Dec. 12, School Leadership's president, Dr.

Charles Fowler, will present a summary of what the firm culled from those meetings, focus group sessions and surveys, and ask the board to adopt specifications that will drive the remaining phases of the search.

Speaking at the first focus group session open to the community, which was attended by only five district residents, Dr. Fowler outlined the successive phases of the search, which he expects will result in a new superintendent hired before Dr. Jackson's resignation takes effect in June 2008.

In mid-October, a letter seeking community input regarding the superintendent search was mailed to every resident of the district, along with other letters going out to staff, community groups, and key leaders in the community encouraging them to take part in

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# District outlines search for superintendent

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process. In meeting with those individuals in groups, and through a questionnaire distributed to various constituents and made available online through the district's Web site, School Leadership sought input on three key questions: what are the good things about the district and why would someone want to come here to serve as superintendent; what are the issues the superintendent will have to provide leadership for over the next three to five years; and what kind of specific qualifications, background and experience would you like to see the new superintendent have.

Each district has its own best and perhaps not so best qualities, and each district has its own needs, issues, problems and opportunities for improvement and growth," said Dr. Fowler, who in the 1960s worked as a teacher and administrator in Bedford Central before serving as superintendent of schools in several districts for 35 years. "This won't be a cookie-cutter approach. After hearing directly from

district staff, faculty, students, parents and members of the community, we'll put together a very specific, solid list of what type of candidate would best serve this specific district, and once the board adopts those specifications, we'll begin the actual search process."

Starting in mid-December, the firm will spread out across the country to find qualified candidates best suited for Bedford Central. The School Leadership team is led by Dr. Fowler, former New York State Commissioner of Education Dr. Thomas Sobol, who also taught in the Bedford Central district in the early 1960s, and Dr. Carol Choye, another former superintendent, teacher and administrator. Around March, the screening process will begin, and a group of semifinalists will be created, followed by an interview process. Once a finalist is selected, a staff group and a community group will then consider the finalist, followed by a site visit to the candidate's school district, coupled with further investigation into any questions or concerns that come up during the process. A superintendent appointment is expected to occur around late April or early May, accord-

ing to Dr. Fowler, and after a contract is negotiated, the new superintendent would begin around July 1, 2008.

School board president Susan Elion Wollin said she is pleased that the superintendent search is progressing, and thanked everyone who participated in the first phase of the search process by providing input at a meeting or by filling out one of the more than 100 questionnaires. "We've said from the start that we wanted this process to have integrity but remain as transparent as possible where appropriate, because we wanted not only the entire school community but the entire district involved in the search process, and I think it's progressing as such," Ms. Wollin said earlier this month. One of the main reasons the board selected School Leadership is the familiarity that Dr. Sobol, Dr. Choye and Dr. Fowler have with the district, as well as their wide range of contacts throughout the country, their understanding of the local communities and their ability to access candidates who might not necessarily be looking to make a job change, Ms. Wollin said.

At this week's board meeting, the

board... munity to June... ing. Dr. Jackson... tion in June... effect until June... an agreement... school board... lump sum payment... pensating her for... remaining three years... tract extension signed... and credited service... efus. She is being... salary for the current year.

Citing a confidentiality clause in the agreement reached with Dr. Jackson, the superintendent and board members have declined to comment on what led to her resignation. According to the agreement, Dr. Jackson's resignation stemmed from "a certain dispute [which] has arisen between the superintendent and the board of education with regard to the superintendent's performance of her duties." Since his firm was retained this fall, Dr. Fowler has repeatedly said he doesn't believe the circumstances in which Dr. Jackson is departing will be a factor in attracting qualified candidates to the district.