

EDUCATION

Green Bay School Board takes no action after district fails to properly investigate abuse complaint



Danielle DuClos

Green Bay Press-Gazette

Published 5:01 a.m. CT Sept. 12, 2023 | Updated 7:24 a.m. CT Sept. 28, 2023

GREEN BAY — Over a month after the Press-Gazette reported the Green Bay School District botched an investigation into a sexual abuse complaint against a Baird Elementary teacher, the Green Bay School Board has largely been silent.

A Press-Gazette investigation found that in 2017, a second-grade student at Baird Elementary told her mother her teacher, David Villareal, had touched her "private parts." Instead of conducting a thorough inquiry into the allegation, the school district mismanaged the investigation and kept Villareal in the classroom — until another girl came forward four years later.

More: A teacher, a sexual abuse allegation and a botched investigation: '4 lives altered forever' by David Villareal in Green Bay School District

Experts who spoke with the Press-Gazette said missteps included asking the child who came forward in 2017 to recount what happened in front of Villareal and closing the investigation without interviewing other students.

The Press-Gazette also found gaps in the county's child welfare system and state reporting laws that kept the extent of Villareal's abuse in the dark.

In April, Villareal was convicted on four counts of felony child sexual assault for touching second-grade students at Baird Elementary between 2015 and 2016. He was sentenced in July to 50 years in prison.

The Green Bay School District maintains that it followed all its obligations under state and federal law, district spokesperson Lori Blakeslee previously told the Press-Gazette. Before

publication of the Press-Gazette's reporting, Blakeslee denied the newsroom's multiple requests to interview district staff with knowledge of the case.

Most Green Bay School Board members don't respond to the Press-Gazette's questions.

Of the current School Board members, only Andrew Becker was serving at the time of the 2017 complaint against Villareal. He did not answer the Press-Gazette's question about whether he was aware of the Villareal complaint at the time.

The Press-Gazette asked each of the School Board's seven members — President Laura McCoy, James Lyerly, Nancy Welch, Becker, Laura Laitinen-Warren, Bryan Milz and Lynn Gerlach — whether they would bring any resolutions or take any action in light of the Press-Gazette's reporting.

The Press-Gazette asked each board member whether they would conduct an independent review on how the district investigated the original 2017 complaint and whether they would review the district's policies and trainings on conducting investigations into sexual abuse complaints.

This summer, the Wausau School School Board hired an outside law firm to review how the Wausau School District responded to allegations that a teacher made discriminatory remarks toward a student. In August, the firm substantiated the student's allegations and found district administration mishandled the complaint.

More: Wausau School Board report supports Asian American family's harassment claims against high school teacher

The Press-Gazette asked each Green Bay School Board member whether they have considered doing a similar review of how the Villareal case was handled.

None of the board's seven members initially responded to the Press-Gazette's questions. Instead, Blakeslee responded, saying the district would not comment further on the case.

All board members were given a subsequent opportunity to share their thoughts and any plans for action as individual, elected officials. Only two of the seven members responded: Lyerly and Laitinen-Warren.

"The board did ask the district to provide us with their accounting of the Villareal case, which they did," Lyerly wrote in an email. "As an individual board member, I was able to ask questions and discuss the actions taken by the district. I sought clarity concerning some of (the Press-Gazette's) reporting and was satisfied by the responses to my questions. Speaking for myself as an individual board member, I will not raise any resolutions based on this case."

Laitinen-Warren said she is continuing to educate herself about the case. "I don't have an additional comment at this time," she wrote in an email.

McCoy, Becker, Gerlach, Milz and Welch did not respond to either of the Press-Gazette's inquiries.

What can the Green Bay School Board do?

Often, the failure to investigate something appropriately results in either policy review and revision or retraining district administrators who are responsible for implementing policies, according to Elisabeth Lambert, founder of the Wisconsin Education Law and Policy Hub.

Usually, it's a combination of both of those outcomes, she said.

Lambert represented the Wausau family who made the discrimination complaint against the district there. She said the board brought in an independent investigator to do two things: investigate the underlying discrimination allegations as well as inform the school board of the district's performance.

"Boards have a statutory power and responsibility to do what's necessary to promote the cause of education in the district — and ... retaining counsel to evaluate or audit like that it is definitely within that scope," she said.

Danielle DuClos is a Report for America corps member who covers K-12 education for the Green Bay Press-Gazette. Contact her at dduclos@gannett.com. Follow on Twitter @danielle_duclos. You can directly support her work with a tax-deductible donation at GreenBayPressGazette.com/RFA or by check made out to The GroundTruth Project with subject line Report for America Green Bay Press Gazette Campaign. Address: The GroundTruth Project, Lockbox Services, 9450 SW Gemini Drive, PMB 46837, Beaverton, Oregon 97008-7105.

