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Substitute teacher sues schools Published 1/15/04

By W. WINSTON SKINNER

winston@newnan.com

Lisa Evans, the substitute teacher fired after she spoke about school system policies last year, has filed suit against the Coweta County Board of Education and three of its top administrators.

Evans' suit was filed Tuesday in U. S. District Court in Newnan by her attorney, **Jason Smith** of Sharpsburg. Named individually and in their official capacities are Dr. Peggy Connell, Coweta's school superintendent; Dr. Patricia Hodge, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction; and Chris Scott, assistant superintendent for administration.

Evans contends that the three administrators and the board violated her First Amendment and Fourteenth Amendment rights as well as rights under the Georgia Constitution.

Evans was hired to work as a substitute teacher around Oct. 18, 2002.

The following spring, the school system undertook several administrative changes. By the time school started in August, 17 of the county's 27 schools had a new principal. Several had new assistant principals, too.

Near the end of March, a meeting was held at White Oak Elementary School about the changes there. A number of parents were unhappy about changes, particularly about Kristin Berryman, the school's popular principal who was moved to an assistant principal position at East Coweta High School.

Berryman subsequently left the county and took a position in Fayette County.

The meeting at White Oak was called "as a response to expressed sentiments of public dissatisfaction " and held "in order to discuss and hear comments... as a means whereby the community could express its concerns and opinions regarding the state and direction of " the school system, according to Evans' suit.

Evans attended the meeting where she "respectfully expressed her concerns and opinions regarding the numerous administrative changes, " the suit stated.

The suit alleges that Connell, Hodge and Scott decided to remove Evans from the teacher substitute list and to ensure she not be called to substitute again. Evans has not taught in a Coweta school since the end of March.

When Evans discovered she had been removed from the substitute system, she contacted Brian Roy, a member of the school board. According to the suit, Connell "admitted she had ordered ... Evans' removal from the substitute teacher procurement system because of the opinion... Evans expressed at the town hall. "

In addition, the suit alleges that when Roy brought Evans' concerns to the school board, board members "expressed agreement and support of the decision " to remove Evans from the sub list.

Roy had no comment on the matter Wednesday afternoon.

Evans used legal counsel to address the issue at a Dec. 8 meeting. On Dec. 29, Evans received notice from the system, stating the board believed she "was not wrongfully removed from the substitute teacher list, as claimed. "

Evans seeks unspecified damages and attorney's fees. She alleges her rights of free speech and petition for a redress of grievances were violated, as were "her procedural due process rights. "

The suit also alleges Evans was treated "differently from other similarly situated individuals " denying her "equal protection under the law. " The suit seeks damages against Connell, Hodge and Scott as individuals for "willful and malicious acts ... motivated by the personal animus and the personal vendetta " against Evans.