

Lawsuit accuses school officials of negligence in assault case



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TONEY, AL -- The father of a 14-year-old girl has filed a lawsuit against administrators and a teacher at Sparkman Middle School, alleging that they allowed his daughter to be raped in a boys' rest room in January.

The lawsuit names as defendants the principal, two assistant principals and a teacher, as well as the alleged attacker and the Madison County Board of Education.

Rich McAdams, president of the board, said Monday that he had not yet seen the lawsuit and could not comment on it.

"This is all news to me," McAdams said.

Sparkman Middle principal Ronnie Blair admitted that there was an incident in January, but would not go into details, citing the pending lawsuit. The principal defended his staff.

"It's a sad situation," Blair said. "At the same time, I feel very comfortable with the way the situation was handled. That's about all I can say."

The lawsuit alleges that on Jan. 22, the girl approached the teacher and told her that a fellow student had asked her to meet him in a restroom for sex. The complaint states that the boy had been harassing several girls in a similar manner over previous weeks, and that school staff, including Blair, knew about the situation.

The lawsuit states that the teacher "coerced" the girl into going into the bathroom with the boy, telling the teen that she would then come in and catch him harassing her.

The teacher "did not follow through with the plan to catch" the boy and the girl was raped, the lawsuit alleges.

Eric Artrip, a lawyer for the girl and her father, said a criminal investigation was conducted after the incident, but that prosecutors declined to file charges against the boy or the teacher involved.

"With rape cases, sometimes there are problems associated with the evidence," Artrip said. "And there are issues involving her ability to articulate what happened to her."

He said the trauma of the incident exacerbated pre-existing mental issues the girl has. She has since been removed from Sparkman Middle and lives with her father in DeKalb County.

Artrip said, however, that he doesn't believe the lack of criminal charges will hinder the civil case against school officials.

"I think the conduct of the principal, the assistant principals and the teacher is well-documented in the criminal investigation," Artrip said.