

Bogota BOE agrees to \$800K settlement with ex-superintendent in wrongful termination suit

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BOGOTA — The Board of Education has settled a lawsuit brought against it by a former schools superintendent, who claimed she was wrongfully dismissed ([/story/news/bergen/bogota/2017/10/04/bogota-superintendent-made-call-led-investigation-attorneys-dismissal-according-court-papers/729563001/](https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/bergen/bogota/2017/10/04/bogota-superintendent-made-call-led-investigation-attorneys-dismissal-according-court-papers/729563001/)) after she placed an anonymous phone call that led to a state investigation.

The \$800,000 agreement, which the board approved last month, was the third settlement of litigation brought by former district employees in the past two years.

Letizia Pantoliano, who had worked in the district since 2009 and served as its superintendent since 2011, alleged in her complaint that she was forced to resign from her position in December 2017 because of her role as a whistleblower in January 2016.

Pantoliano claimed she placed an anonymous call to the state Department of Education raising questions about the billing practices of Richard Brovarone, the former school board attorney, which eventually led to an investigation and Brovarone's dismissal.



Former Bogota Schools Superintendent Letizia Pantoliano in 2015. (Photo: Stephen Mazzella/NorthJersey.com)

She was seeking back pay, future pay, compensation for emotional distress and aggravation of preexisting conditions, punitive damages and legal costs.

Christopher Hager, Pantoliano's attorney, said his client is eager to put the matter behind her and get back to work. Since her dismissal, Pantoliano has been unsuccessful in finding another public education job, he said.

One of the conditions of the settlement is a reference for her work. She had originally sought to be reinstated with the district.

"She wants to put it all behind her and return to work," Hager said. "She cared. Because of what she did, Brovarone isn't there anymore. That's what the complaint was all about — money being used for the wrong purposes and not on the students."

Pantoliano's suit was the last of the three lawsuits brought against the board in recent years to be settled. The settlements were paid for through the district's insurance, said Nathanya Simon, the board attorney.

Last year, the board settled a suit brought by Weijun Kao in which the former business administrator alleged the district breached her contract and violated state labor laws when school officials did not renew her contract for the 2016-17 school year.



Bogota Board of Education President Charles Severino and interim Superintendent Vincent Varcadipane in front of Bogota High School. (Photo: Megan Burrow/NorthJersey.com file photo)

In April, the board agreed to pay \$190,000 to Rosaura Bagolie, the district's former director of special services. She claimed she was wrongfully dismissed from her position because of a disagreement with school officials over placing students diagnosed with Down syndrome and autism in schools outside the district.

In Pantoliano's suit, she named the Board of Education, school district, Brovarone and his law firm and Charles Severino, a school board member who was the president of the board when she left the district, as defendants.

Pantoliano claimed she had raised objections to the flat fee of \$7,900 a month the school board paid Brovarone for his work, rather than a contract that required itemized invoices. In response, Severino and Brovarone engaged in a pattern of retaliation, eventually forcing her resignation, she said.

The settlement makes no admission of guilt. Severino, who plans to step down from the board in January after 25 years, said Pantoliano's claims were false.

"She made it seem like she was penalized. I never did anything to hurt her," he said. "I still don't see how this is a whistleblower lawsuit when nobody even knew it was her. We were all shocked."

Brovarone, who had subsequently come under [similar scrutiny from the state for his contract \(/story/news/bergen/palisades-park/2017/10/05/attorney-fired-bogota-school-board-used-similar-billing-practices-palisades-park/735695001/\)](#) with the Palisades Park Board of Education, had also considered legal action against the district for what he believed was wrongful termination. He had filed a tort claim notice after his dismissal from Bogota. But he said Wednesday that he has since moved out of state and does not plan on filing a lawsuit.

"As far as I'm concerned, it's over with," he said. "Everybody's moved on with their lives."

Megan Burrow is a local reporter for NorthJersey.com. For unlimited access to the most important news from your local community, [please subscribe or activate your digital account today \(https://offers.northjersey.com/specialoffer\)](https://offers.northjersey.com/specialoffer).

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