

EDUCATION

N.J. school counselor gets \$300K settlement after fight over bullying case

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By **Brianna Kudisch | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com**

The Mount Olive school district settled an employee's lawsuit for \$300,000 earlier this year after she sued the district for allegedly wrongfully suspending her after a student's family filed a high-profile lawsuit accusing school officials of mishandling a bullying case.

Megan Troup — a middle school student assistance counselor and anti-bullying specialist — settled her lawsuit against the Morris County school district in April, according to a copy of the settlement obtained by NJ Advance Media. She filed a lawsuit last year alleging school district created a “hostile work environment” after she was named in a student's bullying lawsuit against the district in 2020.

The student's family alleged Mount Olive school officials covered up classmates' bullying of the girl after she was sexually assaulted in a park. The girl's case was eventually settled for \$750,000.

After the girl's family filed the bullying lawsuit, Troup was “wrongfully suspended” by the district in March 2021, she alleged in her lawsuit. The suit did not say how long she was suspended.



Troup eventually returned to work, but is on a paid leave of absence through the end of the month, according to the settlement. In addition to receiving a \$300,000 payment, Troup has agreed to work at an elementary school of the district's choosing after her leave ends.

"This was a business decision and was funded by the board's insurance company," Mount Olive School Board President Lisa Narcise said in a statement about the settlement.

Christopher Hager, Troup's attorney, declined to comment. Mount Olive Superintendent Sumit Bangia did not respond to a request for comment.

The former middle school student who accused the district of covering up bullying filed her lawsuit in August 2020. The district, the school board and other school officials were named as defendants along with Troup.

The girl and her family settled the lawsuit with the school district in October 2021. The girl will receive payments over several decades until she's 60 years old under the \$750,000 structured deal, according to court records.

Troup filed her hostile workplace lawsuit in February 2023 against the district, the school board and other school officials. She has been employed as a student assistance counselor since 2008 and an anti-bullying specialist in the middle school since 2011, the lawsuit said.

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Former Mount Olive Superintendent Robert Zywicki “inappropriately caused” Troup to be removed from handling harassment, intimidation and bullying cases, known as HIB complaints, in the district in order to “artificially reduce” the number of cases reported by Mount Olive, Troup alleged.

School officials also singled Troup out for greater scrutiny when it came to HIB numbers and directed her and other anti-bullying specialists to misrepresent the district’s bullying numbers, she alleged.

“When Plaintiff Troup objected and refused to participate in the inappropriate direction to misrepresent HIB statistics” to the state Department of Education, “she suffered retaliation in the forms of hostility and lowered job performance ratings,” her lawsuit said.

Before Zywicki became superintendent in 2018, Troup had no history of job performance issues or discipline, her lawsuit said.

Zywicki declined to comment on the settlement.

In late April 2023, Zywicki resigned from his position as superintendent in the school district, citing a “toxic” environment created by the school board. His resignation came several months after the school board placed him on paid leave the previous fall for unspecified reasons.

Troup also alleged another school official physically intimidated and threatened her when she attempted to comply with state bullying laws, according to her lawsuit.

One incident “included him angrily throwing an object in her direction during a meeting in his office about an HIB hostile school environment incident she was handling,” the suit alleged.

Troup was routinely excluded from HIB-related issues, including the former student’s bullying case, because she “conscientiously objected” to the district’s failure to comply with state bullying acts, the lawsuit said.

She denied she failed in her duties as an anti-bullying specialist in the case of the student who sued the district.

“Instead, she was excluded from that matter, scapegoated and punished by the Mount Olive Defendants for their unlawful conduct,” Troup’s lawsuit alleged.



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