

Page Printed From:

<https://www.law.com/thelegalintelligencer/2024/03/20/ex-nfl-star-and-penn-state-fullback-turned-educator-files-lawsuit-alleging-systemic-racism-against-school-district/>



NOT FOR REPRINT

COMMENTARY

Ex-NFL Star and Penn State Fullback Turned Educator Files Lawsuit Alleging Systemic Racism Against School District

Omar Easy's claims paint a picture of a hostile work environment fraught with racial tension, unjust treatment and systemic prejudice. As the case unfolds, it raises critical questions about equity, inclusivity and the challenges faced by leaders of color in educational institutions.

March 20, 2024 at 09:18 AM

Employment Law

By Jeffrey Campolongo and Scott M. Badami | March 20, 2024 at 09:18 AM

The story of Omar Easy reads like a promising narrative of achievement and ambition, with all the elements of a perfect comeback. A former NFL star athlete turned educator, Easy's journey took him from the pinnacle of sports to the corridors of academia, driven by a passion to lead and inspire in the small town of Wayland, Massachusetts. Easy, who was born in Jamaica and raised in Everett, Massachusetts, played collegiate football at Penn State before being selected by the Kansas City Chiefs in the fourth round of the 2002 NFL Draft. He played one season for the Oakland Raiders before retiring due to knee problems.

Easy returned to his home state with the goal to ultimately lead a local suburban school district. However, what began as a tale of promise has unraveled into a web of distrust and bitter legal contentions. See *Easy v. Town of Wayland*, Case No. 2481-cv-680 (Mass. Super. Ct. filed Mar. 13, 2024).

Amid allegations of racial discrimination, Easy, a distinguished educator, filed a civil complaint against the town of Wayland, and two school officials. His claims paint a picture of a hostile work environment fraught with racial tension, unjust treatment and systemic prejudice. As the case unfolds, it raises critical questions about equity, inclusivity and the challenges faced by leaders of color in educational institutions.

Easy filed a six-count discrimination complaint on March 13 against the town of Wayland and two school officials asserting racial discrimination (along with related claims) in a civil complaint filed in Middlesex Superior Court. The school official defendants are white. According to his complaint, prior to being hired as the first Black superintendent of the Wayland Public Schools in 2021, Easy was an administrator with the Everett Public School System during his tenure. He held a number of positions during his time at Everett. Easy also worked in the mayor's office as the director of organizational assessment. Easy holds a Ph.D. in educational leadership and a master's degree in education in educational administration from Penn State University. The former NFL running back also holds an MBA from the University of Phoenix.

Easy alleged that during the hiring process, one of the white members of the hiring committee said that "Black people cannot be leaders and lacked leadership skills" and asked consultants organizing the search to find additional white candidates, per the lawsuit. In his complaint, Easy also asserts that a severe and pervasive racially hostile work environment existed in Wayland, one in which he was subject to racist remarks, racist graffiti, racial stereotyping, disparate treatment and unjustified attacks. The racist graffiti found inside the middle school bathroom included use of the n-word, "BLACK PEOPLE DIE," and "ALL BLACK PEOPLE NEED TO LEAVE THE DISTRICT NOW."

Furthermore, Easy alleges that his efforts to confront these racial incidents and microaggressions were "fanned" by the individual defendants and that he was accused of "destroying Wayland's culture" and "bringing Everett's culture to Wayland," which Easy claims was a veiled racist threat. Easy further suggests that he would face "consequences for opposing discrimination" and suggests a school administrator said Easy "had done himself a 'significant disservice' by raising racial concerns."

The complaint also details a number of claimed racist incidents that took place in the Wayland schools while Easy was the superintendent, including at a Wayland girls varsity basketball game at which a Black Wayland athlete was called the n word, as well as noting racially tinged vandalism directed specifically at him and others of color that Easy asserts "publicly humiliated" him. He seeks \$5 million in damages, including front pay, back pay, emotional distress, punitive damages, interest and related relief.

As Easy's relationship with the Wayland school officials fractured, he also filed an administrative complaint with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD), in which he asserted similar claims. Easy was involuntarily placed on leave in February 2023 and was replaced by an acting superintendent who is white. While the Wayland defendants have not yet commented on the civil complaint, in response to the MCAD action, the defendants stated "the Wayland School Committee wishes to reiterate that the Wayland public

schools seeks to foster a welcoming, inclusive, anti-racist environment; our actions have and will continue to demonstrate a commitment to those principles ... we are asking the members of our school community for their patience during this time.”

Prior to placing Easy on leave, there was a meeting with various principals, assistant principals, and administrators at which time some staff members alleged Easy was using “fear” and “intimidation” against them. As such, Wayland hired outside counsel to conduct an inquiry into Easy’s conduct, which according to Easy’s complaint, concluded that while the outside lawyer found no evidence of misconduct, Wayland refused to make the findings of the inquiry public.

In employment cases like this, having multiple complaints pending at the same time is common. To be sure, unlike in housing discrimination cases (which are referred to as Title VIII actions), employment discrimination cases (referred to as Title VII claims) are required to be reviewed by either the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) or a similar state agency (which here was the MCAD) as a prerequisite before filing in federal or state court. Many times the EEOC or state agency takes quite a long time before either issuing a “right to sue” letter (which means they are dismissing the administrative complaint) or stepping in for the plaintiff and prosecuting the case (which happens when they issue a “charge of discrimination”).

Easy’s journey from Happy Valley to the NFL to the superintendent’s office symbolizes the aspirations and obstacles encountered by many striving for excellence in education. Yet, his experience serves as a stark reminder of the persistent barriers and biases that continue to plague many suburban educational systems. As the legal proceedings unfold, it is not merely a case of one individual’s fight for justice but a reflection of broader societal issues.

The outcome of Easy’s battle against racial discrimination in Wayland will reverberate far beyond the confines of the courtroom. It has the potential to shape the narrative of diversity, equity, and inclusion in education, serving as a litmus test for the commitment of institutions to create truly inclusive environments.

Jeffrey Campolongo *is the founder of the Law Office of Jeffrey Campolongo, which, for over a decade, has been devoted to counseling employees, working professionals and small businesses in employment discrimination and human resource matters.*

Scott M. Badami *represents clients in housing and employment matters in state and federal court as well as in arbitrations, mediations and agency proceedings. His office is in Blue Bell.*

NOT FOR REPRINT

Copyright © 2024 ALM Global, LLC. All Rights Reserved.