

SCHOOL MOLESTATION ATTORNEY: TEACHERS VICTIMIZE LATINOS

By Rob Kuznia Staff Writer

In the wake of yet another sex abuse arrest in the Los Angeles Unified School District, former state Sen. Martha Escutia came to a Wilmington elementary school Monday to call for an LAUSD investigation into what she believes is a pattern of such abuse against Latino youth by teachers in low-income areas.

Escutia, an attorney who serves on the legal team representing more than 30 children allegedly abused by teachers at Miramonte Elementary School in South Los Angeles, blasted the district for refusing to turn over documents pertaining to 600 complaints about teacher misconduct.

She likened the LAUSD's reaction to the abuse cases to that of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, which kept its sensitive documents sealed until ordered by a judge to release them.

"I don't think LAUSD wants to become the next Archdiocese of Los Angeles," she said.

Escutia's comments come several days after law enforcement officials announced the arrest of former LAUSD teacher Robert Pimentel on charges he sexually abused at least 20 children at George De La Torre Jr. Elementary School in Wilmington, where Escutia held her press conference.

In that case, the school's principal at the time took no action when similar allegations were leveled against the same teacher at another school, according to LAUSD Superintendent John Deasy. Pimentel and the principal, Irene Hinojosa, both retired on the same day, just as Deasy was moving to fire them, he said. Despite Deasy's comments on the latest case, Escutia accused LAUSD officials of being

tight-lipped on the matter.

"We wouldn't even be here having this press conference if LAUSD would speak up," she said. "Their silence has frankly been deafening."

LAUSD responded to her complaints with a statement Monday detailing the efforts it has made to crack down on abusive teachers since the Miramonte scandal erupted nearly a year ago.

"We are consistently working to strengthen student safety, including implementing numerous policy changes and supporting meaningful statewide legislative reforms," said David Holmquist, general counsel for the school district.

Holmquist said the district is working with state Sen. Alex Padilla, a San Fernando Valley Democrat, on a bill that would speed the process of firing teachers accused of serious misconduct.

He also cited reforms that have already occurred within the district, such as a new policy mandating that parents be notified within 72 hours of any misconduct allegations at a school where their children attend.

As for Pimentel and the school's former principal, Hinojosa, they both previously worked at Dominguez Elementary School in Carson.

Magdalena Gonzalez, a volunteer at George De La Torre Elementary, said the two seemed to have a tight bond from the outset.

"At the beginning, people assumed he was her son, or they had some kind of relationship," Gonzalez said through a translator, Connie Calderon, director of a nearby teen center.

Gonzalez, whose own children once attended the school, said it was common for Pimentel to have two or three students in his room while the other students were away for lunch or recess. "It

was always girls," she said.

Calderon added that Hinojosa had been transferred to Dominguez Elementary years ago after some kind of parent uproar at Fries Avenue School.

The Miramonte Elementary scandal erupted a year ago, when police arrested teacher Mark Berndt at his Torrance residence on suspicion of lewd acts, such as taking photos of kids eating spoonfuls of his semen.

In addition to the scandals at Miramonte and George De La Torre, similar allegations of sexual abuse have surfaced at other campuses in poor neighborhoods populated mainly by Latino families, Escutia said. She cited the recent sentencing of Paul Chapel, a former third-grade teacher at Telfair Elementary in Pacoima who molested 13 students.

Escutia criticized LAUSD for not following through on a plan to form an independent commission headed up by former Supreme Court Justice Carlos Moreno.

"Well, guess what? We haven't heard anything about that independent commission," she said. "And my question is: Why not?"

She said she suspects students of undocumented immigrants are often targeted because their parents tend to be working multiple jobs and are perhaps afraid to rock the boat.

"Sometimes I get very frustrated because I see little kids in one-room homes, basically wearing all these coats because their families cannot afford the heating bill," she said. "That's the type of poverty that we have. That's Miramonte."

She said she doesn't know for certain that a pattern of sexual abuse exists in such schools, largely because of what she characterized as the district's silence on the matter.

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Former state Senator Martha Escutia wants an investigation into alleged sexual abuse by **LAUSD** teachers. She was at George De La Torre Jr. Elementary School in Wilmington on Monday.

Chuck Bennett Staff Photographer



LAUSD administrators named in suit over sex abuse

COURTS: Victims claim superintendent, others deliberately ignored suspicious behavior.

By Barbara Jones Staff Writer

The attorney for a dozen students who claim they were molested at Miramonte Elementary filed suit Tuesday against a slate of LAUSD administrators, including Superintendent John Deasy and four of his predecessors, saying they knowingly

allowed teachers suspected of sex abuse to continue harming students.

Attorney Brian Claypool, who previously sued the district over the sex-abuse scandal at Miramonte, says in his amended suit that district administrators deliberately ignored complaints against teacher Mark Berndt and other suspected molesters.

"The conduct of these superintendents shows that they created a custom and practice and pattern of harboring suspected child predators at the expense of the safety and welfare of children," Claypool said in an interview.

Berndt was arrested a year ago on suspicion of molesting 13 students at Miramonte by spoon-feeding them his own semen in a bizarre tasting game. He is being held in lieu of \$13 million bail.

The suit claims that Berndt molested hundreds of children during his 20-plus years at Miramonte and during his previous job in another district.

Claypool's suit also cites the case of Robert Pimentel, who was arrested last week on suspicion of molesting students at De La Torre Jr. Elementary School in Wilmington. Complaints had previously been lodged against Pimentel in 2002 and 2008.

Authorities are investigating whether Pimentel's principal, Irene Hinojosa, failed to report complaints as required by law. Deasy was preparing to fire Pimentel and Hinojosa when they retired last March.

"Serial child abuse of this nature on such a massive scale could not have been accomplished without the aid and assistance of many other LAUSD staff and/or administration officials and without the LAUSD itself turning a blind eye to what was happening," the suit said.

The suit says the district lacked a policy for how to document or track allegations of misconduct.

It also cites the district's failure to immediately notify the state teacher licensing board that Berndt had been arrested. That and nearly 150 other instances in which the district failed to alert the Commission on Teacher Credentialing about a problem teacher were included in a critical state audit released in November.

The suit seeks compensatory and punitive damages against the district, the seven-member school board, Deasy and former Superintendents Ramon Cortines, David Brewer, Ruben Zacarias and Roy Romer.

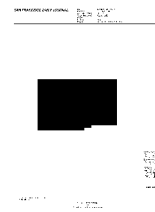
David Holmquist, the district's general counsel, released a statement saying LAUSD is committed to providing a safe environment for students.

"Appropriately addressing misconduct continues to remain a top priority," he said. "That is why we have continually engaged in extensive internal and external reviews of our policies and practices, including actively participating in the comprehensive state audit of the school district's policies and practices that was released in 2012."

Holmquist said the district has created a process to ensure that all cases involving suspected abuse are reported to the state.

The district has also implemented a policy to notify parents within 72 hours if a teacher has been pulled from the classroom because of a sex-abuse complaint. That was implemented after the district came under fire for waiting five months to alert parents at Telfair Elementary School in Pacoima that teacher Paul Chapel had been arrested for molestation.

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BRIEFLY

A report says a defrocked priest suspected of child molestation left the Los Angeles Archdiocese to work for the LA Unified School District. The Los Angeles Times says 66-year-old Joseph Pina was let go from the district over the weekend. LAUSD Superintendent John Deasy tells the newspaper that Pina did not work with children in his job with the nation's second-largest school system. Pina's name appeared in files released recently by the archdiocese to comply with a court order. The Times says his case was one of many in which church officials protected priests accused of abuse. School officials could not immediately say when Pina was hired.