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### Lawsuit claims former Putnam Valley teacher sexually assaulted student

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THE JOURNAL NEWS  
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Allegations that a former Putnam Valley Middle School teacher drugged and sexually assaulted a student nearly six years ago have been filed in a federal lawsuit seeking \$17 million in damages from the teacher and the school district.

Laura Bliss and her father, Peter Bliss, claim former social studies teacher Dennis Tave sexually assaulted her in February 2001, when she was in seventh grade. Inappropriate sexual advances continued until 2003, according to the complaint filed in U.S. District Court in White Plains on Dec. 27.

The lawsuit is the latest development in a case that began three years ago but was thought to have been abandoned.

It claims the district knew or should have known that Tave, a veteran teacher, had made sexual advances toward female students before the alleged assault of Laura Bliss.

The Putnam County Sheriff's Office investigated the allegations in May 2003, when Laura Bliss first reported them.

At the time, Tave denied any wrongdoing. He requested a lie detector test and failed, according to the lawsuit and police documents.

The sheriff's investigation was "closed, pending leads" in July 2003 without any charges being filed, according to police documents.

An investigation by the Putnam County District Attorney's Office also did not result in charges, according to court documents.

The school district had placed Tave on paid leave upon learning of the allegations, according to the lawsuit.

School officials also notified the state Education Department of the student's claims and launched their own investigation into Tave's conduct, according to a Board of Education statement published in a local newspaper in January 2004.

The school district had not yet completed its investigation when Tave, whose salary was \$87,103 in the 2002-03 school year, submitted his resignation for the purpose of retirement on Oct. 23, 2003. That became effective July 1, 2004, according to Board of Education meeting minutes.

Although general municipal law requires claims against a public entity to be filed within 90 days of the occurrence, the Bliss family successfully sought permission to file a late notice of claim in state Supreme Court in Carmel in December 2003.

"The trauma of this event was so overwhelming as to preclude her (Laura Bliss) from coming forward sooner," Justice John W. Sweeny said in granting the motion in April 2004.

It was unclear yesterday what happened to the original case or why the family decided to pursue its claims in federal court instead.

In a statement submitted to the lower court, Laura Bliss detailed how Tave asked her to stay after school to study for a test she had missed after being sick with Lyme disease.

She claimed she drank water given to her by Tave, and soon felt dizzy and started seeing spots. Tave allegedly then hugged Laura and tripped her, causing her to fall to the ground.

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Laura claims she saw Tave unbuckle his belt and unzip his pants, and then she completely blacked out, according to the statement. She allegedly woke up on her back about 30 minutes later with Tave telling her it was time to leave. She claimed her pants and underwear had been pulled down to the middle of her thigh and that when she ran to the bathroom, she was bleeding.

Other inappropriate behavior allegedly consisted of Tave later pulling Laura's pants away from her body to see if she wore underpants.

A psychotherapist said Laura suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and anorexia nervosa as a result of the assault, according to court documents.

Tave called the allegations "a complete fabrication" in a response he filed with the court three years ago. Tave said it was regrettable that Peter Bliss had embarked on a "liable and slander campaign," misspelling the word "libel."

Some 70 former students signed a petition supporting Tave, according to a statement filed in the original case by Principal Edward Hallisey.

Tave, a Mahopac resident, could not be reached for comment Thursday.

Dennis L. O'Connor Jr., the school district's attorney, said yesterday that he was surprised to learn that a different lawyer had taken the case to federal court.

"I don't know what prompted this little girl to say what she said, but unfortunately it affected this teacher and his reputation and, of course, the school district," he said. "When you see a case going from lawyer to lawyer, it creates a question."

Carolyn V. Minter, the Blisses' attorney, could not be reached for comment. Peter Bliss referred questions to a Web site the family maintains urging others to contact them or the state Education Department if they face a similar situation.

At least one other student filed a complaint with the sheriff's office claiming Tave touched her inappropriately, according to court documents from the original case.

"The sad truth is that the Putnam Valley school district failed our daughter miserably and let a pedophile slip away in the process," Peter Bliss says in a statement on his Web site. "All the administrators and fellow teachers who work in the school who are well aware of the behavior of Dennis Tave and have remained silent or have lied have their own conscience to reckon with."

Reach Diana Bellettieri Costello at [dbellett@lohud.com](mailto:dbellett@lohud.com) or 845-228-2278.

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The website of the Bliss family is: [www.thechildfirst.com](http://www.thechildfirst.com)

It is important that parents talk to their children about their experiences with Dennis Tave as a teacher. The students affected would be in grades 10 and up thru college. The students affected are older now and maybe more comfortable in expressing themselves. And it is important to come forward to document inappropriate behavior on the part of Dennis Tave.

The best place to file a complaint would be with the State Education Dept. - there website regarding teacher discipline is:



<http://www.highered.nysed.gov/tcert/respublic/teacherdiscipline.htm>

Posted by: **curlyjams** on Sun Jan 07, 2007 9:51 pm

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