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Ex-Putnam Valley teacher's license suspended pending psych review

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A former Putnam Valley Middle School teacher behaved inappropriately around female students, but there is not enough evidence to prove more serious allegations that he drugged and raped a 12-year-old girl in 2001, the state Education Department says.

In a hearing to determine whether former social studies teacher Dennis Tave should retain his teaching license, the Education Department found in March that he exercised a "serious lack of judgment" and "poor impulse control" on several occasions.

As a result, the state suspended his license until he undergoes a forensic psychological evaluation and completes any recommended mental-health treatment, all at his own cost, according to a copy of the report.

"The position of a schoolteacher requires extreme trust, personal integrity and the ability to practice good judgment," said Diane J. Exoo, the Education Department hearing officer. "This requires a teacher to recognize professional boundaries at all times. If a teacher crosses those boundaries, it is a betrayal of trust and places the student at risk, both physically and emotionally."

No one was home yesterday at Tave's Kennard Road house in Mahopac. His lawyer, Stephen Santoro, provided a copy of the Education Department's findings but would not answer questions.

The Education Department's report provides yet another glimpse into the actions of the former teacher, who had a 40-year history in the Putnam Valley schools before retiring amid controversy in July 2004.

Allegations of sexual assault first placed the otherwise respected teacher into the spotlight in May 2003, when Laura Bliss and her father, Peter Bliss, brought their claims to the Putnam County Sheriff's Office.

Laura Bliss says that in 2001, when she was in seventh grade, she stayed after class to study for a test she had missed but started feeling dizzy and seeing spots when she drank water Tave had given her. She alleges he then hugged her and tripped her, causing her to fall to the floor.

Before she blacked out, Laura Bliss claims, she saw Tave unbuckle his belt and unzip his pants.

She alleges waking up on her back 30 minutes later with Tave telling her it was time to leave. She says 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.

Sexual advances are alleged to have continued until 2003.

Though Tave testified to the Education Department that Bliss never came to his room after school and

that he never observed her fainting, the hearing officer found other collaborating testimonies from a sheriff's investigator and other witnesses to be more credible.

Nevertheless, the hearing officer determined that Laura Bliss' sole recollection of the events was not enough to prove her allegations.

The Education Department's hearing recommendation cited the student's eating disorder as a possible explanation for her fainting and a diagnosed yeast infection as a possible reason for her reported discomfort.

The story surrounding the allegations resurfaced this week after the state Commission of Investigation released a report criticizing how school officials, police and prosecutors handled the case.

The Sheriff's Office had closed the investigation without filing any charges in July 2003, two months after picking it up.

In November 2004, after no further of inactivity on the sheriff's end, the Putnam County District Attorney's Office commenced its own investigation upon the urging of Peter Bliss, according to the commission report.

The case did go to a grand jury, but there was not an indictment, and the commission criticized Assistant District Attorney Makaria Gallagher for not pursuing the case more aggressively.

The family still has a federal lawsuit seeking at least \$17 million in damages from the teacher and the Putnam Valley school district.

"I want to know what happened to my daughter," said Peter Bliss, 53, a songwriter. "When is anybody ever going to take responsibility for their actions, or inaction? We're taking responsibility for ours."

The Bliss family had complained to Gov. George Pataki that the case had been mishandled, which prompted the Commission of Investigation to launch its inquiry in January 2007.

The commission's report, issued Tuesday, concluded that several "significant failures" negatively influenced the investigation.

In addition to other alleged missteps reported yesterday in The Journal News, the commission's report found that the sheriff's investigator assigned to the case, Detective Sgt. Donald Killarney, had not conducted an active investigation in at least 15 years and was not qualified to handle the case.

Capt. William McNamara of the Sheriff's Office said yesterday in a statement that no one, including the Bliss family, had ever informed Putnam Sheriff Donald Smith of problems with Killarney's investigation. Killarney is now retired.

Smith has since overhauled many aspects of his department, McNamara said, including improving the assigning of cases and the control and oversight of the Bureau of Criminal Investigation, which conducted the Bliss investigation.

As for the school district, the commission found that Putnam Valley Middle School Principal Edward Hallisey had aligned himself with the former teacher, who was his friend, at the expense of the alleged victim.

Testimony provided to the commission by former Interim Superintendent Robert Pauline supported such a finding. He said Hallisey and then-Putnam Valley Federation of Teachers President Gail Gutterman did not want to launch a full investigation into the allegations and were close enough to Tave that they would "stonewall" an investigation if given the opportunity.

Pauline insisted, however, that the school district's attorneys conduct an extensive investigation, which uncovered other claims of inappropriate conduct involving Tave.

At least two of these allegations were brought to Hallisey's attention before the alleged 2001 incident involving Laura Bliss, according to the report.

One 12-year-old student claimed Tave wrapped himself around her and pulled her close to his body. Another student claimed that when she turned 13, Tave told her she was ready to "make out" with boys and would have to do so with all the boys in the class, according to the report.

These allegations also were found in the Education Department's investigation, among other complaints that Tave flirted with female students, twirled their hair and made them feel uncomfortable.

Putnam Valley Schools Superintendent Marc Space, who joined the district this school year, said yesterday that to the best of his knowledge, Hallisey had adequately followed up on prior complaints against Tave, but had not kept any documentation to prove his actions.

"That was really the only thing we didn't have at the time was written documentation," Space said.
