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## Family seeks governor's help with school rape case

*Diana Costello*  
*The Journal News*

Time is running out for family members who claim a former Putnam Valley Middle School teacher drugged and raped their daughter when she was 12 years old, and now the fate of the case rests with Gov. David A. Paterson.

Peter Bliss, the girl's father, wrote a letter this month requesting that the governor assign a special prosecutor to the case or take whatever other action may be necessary to start legal proceedings before the statute of limitations expires May 20.

Laura Bliss claims a former social studies teacher, Dennis Tave, sexually assaulted her in a classroom after school in 2001 and continued to make other sexual advances until 2003.

"I am the father of a girl who has been wrongly treated by every institution there to protect her," said Peter Bliss, 53, a songwriter. "We simply want there to be an impartial investigation of all parties involved."

Under state law, prosecution for a sexual offense must begin within five years of the most recent act. In cases involving children under the age of 18, however, time does not begin to run out until the offense is reported to law enforcement or the child turns 18, whichever occurs first.

In this case, Laura Bliss reported the allegations to the Putnam County Sheriff's Office on May 20, 2003, hence next week's deadline.

Calls to the Governor's Office for comment yesterday were not returned.

The family's appeal to the governor comes after an emotionally exhausting few weeks in which two state reports looking into the allegations were made public, revealing pieces of information that previously had not been known to the family.

One report from the state Commission of Investigation concluded that the investigation of Bliss' complaint by school officials, police and prosecutors was seriously flawed.

For instance, the report found that top school officials, including Putnam Valley Middle School Principal Edward Hallisey, failed to adequately address prior complaints against the teacher and then sided with him when the more serious rape allegations were brought to light.

A separate report from the state Department of Education concluded that the teacher exercised a "serious lack of judgment" and "poor impulse control," citing several instances where he made girls feel uncomfortable.

On one occasion, he wrapped himself around a 12-year-old student and pulled her into his body, and on another he told a 13-year-old she was old enough to "make out" and would have to do so with all the boys in the class.

While the Education Department concluded it did not have enough physical evidence to confirm the rape allegation, the hearing officer nevertheless suspended Tave's teaching license pending psychological evaluations.

One crucial finding that came to light through these investigations was that Tave purportedly had been in a classroom after school with Laura Bliss when she fainted and lost consciousness.

Laura Bliss contends she had stayed after class to study for a test and started feeling dizzy after Tave had given her water. It is alleged he then hugged her and tripped her to the ground, she says. Before completely blacking out, she claims, she saw Tave unbuckle his belt and unzip his pants. She alleges she woke up on her back 30 minutes later with her pants and her underwear pulled down to the middle of her thigh.

While Tave testified to the Education Department that Laura Bliss never came to his room after school, the hearing officer found other collaborating testimonies from a sheriff's investigator and other witnesses to be more credible.

The lawyer representing Dennis Tave, Stephen Santoro, did not return a request for comment yesterday.

News of the allegations and the subsequent findings of the state investigations have raised varied community responses.

On the one hand, parents are wondering what to think about the role Hallisey played in the matter.

Jeffrey Ricker, whose two children are in the elementary school, said the school board must look into the facts to determine whether Hallisey knew of prior complaints against Tave - then take the appropriate action.

"If allegations of Hallisey's knowing past incidents are true, then yes, it's grounds for removal," said Ricker, 39, an engineer.

Board of Education President Tina Mackay could not be reached yesterday for comment.

Others, meanwhile, are pledging their support for Hallisey, saying they "respect him as a professional" to make the right decisions.

"He's top-notch in my book," said Dana Rose Lopez, a past PTA co-president. "I fully respect him, and I think he's a great principal."

Even those without children in the schools have been following the case -especially because of the financial implications of litigation.

The Bliss family has an active federal lawsuit seeking at least \$17 million in damages from the teacher and the school district.

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