

The Miami Herald

BROWARD SCHOOLS

Teen sues in molest case

Miramar teenager who told police his middle school teacher molested him is suing the Broward School Board for negligence.

SARA OLKON
solkon@MiamiHerald.com

The sex abuse began with a touch, the teenager said, and ended some 18 months later, with humiliating fliers posted in and around Miramar's New Renaissance Middle School.

Aaron Mohanlal, 39, the school's former art teacher, has been charged with child molestation and was fired in August 2005. His trial is scheduled to begin next month.

But in this case, the student's parents want more than justice in a criminal courtroom.

The teenager and his family have filed a civil suit against the Broward School Board, seeking at least \$600,000. A lawyer representing the teenager and his parents said administrators failed to adequately supervise Mohanlal.

"This boy was sexually abused during school hours," said attorney Diana Santa Maria.

The legal strategy is similar to that used by pedophilia victims who have sued the Catholic Church claiming abuse by priests.

"The individual probably does not have much in the way of funds, so the plaintiffs go after the deep pockets," said Bruce Rogow, a professor at the Shepard Broad Law Center at Nova Southeastern University.

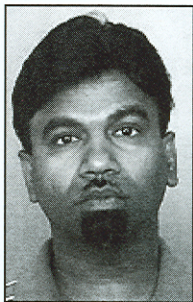
The key is proving that church leaders - or in this case, school administrators - were aware or should have been aware of the abuse.

Mohanlal has pleaded not guilty to all criminal charges, said his attorney, Steve Rossi.

Miramar police assert that the abuse began in the spring of 2003, when the seventh-grader was 13. The teen told them Mohanlal asked to see and touch his genitals, then handed him his phone number and encouraged him to call over the summer.

The teen said that in the fall the art teacher increased contact, with more than 30 fondling sessions in his supply room. Subsequent intimate sessions, the teenager told authorities, took place inside Mohanlal's 1995 Nissan Altima.

By the time the teenager was in ninth grade at Miramar High School, the pair were meeting at the teacher's North Lauderdale home, the boy told police.



ACCUSED: Teacher Aaron Mohanlal

When the teen ended the relationship, Santa Maria said, an angered Mohanlal instructed his students to make fliers that suggested the teenager had been sexually violating dogs.

It became so humiliating, the boy finally told his parents about the abuse, Santa Maria said.

'BEST THING'

"In a way, that was the best thing that happened, because he told his parents," she said.

While school district spokesman Keith Bromery declined to comment on the case, he emphasized that district officials "immediately" investigate when an allegation of abuse is made.

To successfully sue the School Board, Rogow said, the plaintiffs would have to demonstrate negligence: Was there a failure to do a background check? Did information come to the School Board about the teacher that members failed to act on?

Mohanlal was hired as an art teacher in August 2001 at New Renaissance, 10701 Miramar Blvd. He earned about \$33,000 a year, records show.

Santa Maria would not say whether school officials, parents or students reported any problems with Mohanlal before the teen's allegation surfaced in December 2004.

Personnel records released by the school district on Mohanlal do not include any prior complaints. His evaluations were satisfactory.

A former principal at Bright Horizon Center, where Mohanlal was a substitute, called him a "great person," and said he was "very conscientious."

The file includes this glowing reference from Pastor Joel E. Walters at the Church of God in Coral Springs: "Mr. Mohanlal is a very fine gentleman of very high moral qualities . . ."

BACKGROUND CHECK

Records from August 2001 indicate that he was fingerprinted and that a security background check had been completed. The file indicates that he is not to be rehired.

The potential cost to the Broward School Board - even if it is determined to have been negligent - remains unclear. Sovereign immunity - by law given to public agencies and governments - caps damages at \$200,000, said Fort Lauderdale attorney Russell S. Adler.

Mohanlal is out of jail on a \$160,000 bond. If convicted on all counts, he could face life in prison.