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Adams-Cheshire school officials drop sexual abuse probe



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The Adams-Cheshire Regional School Committee has decided not to pursue any further investigation into allegations of sexual assault by an Adams Memorial Middle School custodian in the 1970s.

EAGLE FILE

Posted Tuesday, January 9, 2018 8:27 pm

By Bob Dunn, The Berkshire Eagle

ADAMS — Four months after agreeing to open a second investigation into claims regarding sexual assault against middle school students in the mid-1970s, the Adams-Cheshire Regional School Committee has decided to halt any investigation and has prepared no report on the matter.

In September, the School Committee, following an hourlong discussion in executive session, released a statement (<https://www.scribd.com/document/368789946/Adams-Cheshire-Regional-School-Committee-Abuse-Response-January-2018>), stating in part, "The district is now investigating these additional claims and will treat every person who has and who will come forward with dignity and confidentiality."

The claims came to light following an August 2017 story in The Eagle (<http://www.berkshireeagle.com/stories/dark-secrets-surface-two-boys-now-men-claim-abuse-by-school-custodian-in-the-1970s,517228>) detailing abuse allegations brought forward by two men who said they were both sexually assaulted by custodian Clement St. Hilaire in 1976.

(<http://berkshireeagle.com/stories/did-this-community-lose-a-generation-of-boysvictims-unable-to-report-abuse-suffered-alone,517227>)

Those two men, with the assistance of an attorney, brought their claims to the School Committee in early 2016. An investigation undertaken by a lawyer hired by the School Committee at that time concluded there was an "absence of proof" regarding the allegations and the committee declined to act further.

Following the publication by The Eagle of a series of stories in which other victims came forward (<http://www.berkshireeagle.com/stories/5-more-come-forward-claiming-sexual-abuse-from-former-adams-school-custodian,517362>) and said, they, too, were assaulted by St. Hilaire, and in which St. Hilaire admitted he had molested children at the school, the School Committee said it was opening a new investigation and encouraged victims to come forward and contact the School Department. (<http://www.berkshireeagle.com/stories/school-district-ready-to-hear-further-claims-former-students-say-they-were-assaulted-by-junior,517566>)

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The School Committee named lawyer Nancy Frankel Pelletier as the person hired to conduct the second investigation. For months in the latter half of 2017, The Eagle, through email and phone calls, tried to confirm that Pelletier was investigating the matter for the School Committee. The Eagle's calls and emails went unanswered.

The School Committee's statement released this week concluded by stating, "For purposes of clarity, we provide advice to the District with respect to sexual abuse matters generally and in the event a claim is brought forward, we will investigate."*

That contradicts information provided in September by School Committee Chairman Paul Butler, who said:

In mid-October, Superintendent Robert Putnam acknowledged an investigation was forthcoming when his lawyer (who conducted the first investigation) became a judge, so we're just waiting to hear from the person who made the claim anything yet."

Hampden County Superior Judge Michael Callan, who was an attorney at the time, conducted the first investigation. The men who made the original claims, William Howcroft and a man identified as "Frank," who did not want to reveal his real name in the press, were not contacted as part of that investigation.

Over the last few weeks, attempts to get an update on the status of any new investigation from Putnam were unsuccessful. Putnam did not respond to phone messages or emails.

On Tuesday morning, Butler sent an email to The Eagle, saying a statement had been released following the previous evening's School Committee meeting.

According to the statement, "fewer than eight" people contacted the district regarding assault allegations and only four of those spoke with "district personnel."

No specific number of respondents was provided, and the district personnel were not identified by name or title.

Howcroft told The Eagle he contacted the School Department in light of the announcement about the proposed second investigation. He said he left a message for Putnam with his name and contact information, but never received a call back.

The man identified as Frank, said he, too, contacted Putnam's office and gave his true name and made it clear that he was the Frank interviewed in the article.

"I never heard a peep thereafter," Frank said via email Tuesday.

Frank said he was not surprised the district is not interested in pursuing an investigation.

"They have not been interested from the beginning," he said.

The statement from Butler went on to note that no legal action against the school had been filed.

"Since no claim or suit has been filed, the District's investigatory activities ceased and no report was prepared," part of the statement reads.

Butler declined to answer questions Tuesday, including why the lack of a lawsuit precludes an investigation, and said via email he had no further comment beyond the statement.

Matthew Fogelman, the attorney who first brought the allegations to The Eagle, said via email Tuesday he was "at a loss for words" as to why the district has chosen to conduct itself in this manner.

"How incredibly disappointing that the only reason the district would seek to 'investigate' the sexual abuse that happened — under their watch, on their property, with their employee — is if a lawsuit had been filed. What about investigating so that we know WHY these atrocities occurred? Who else knew about St. Hilare's molestations? Was it covered up? Why was he allowed private access to young boys? Why weren't the police notified?"

Each of the seven members of the School Committee, including Butler, were contacted via email Tuesday seeking further comment. No replies were received.

Reach Bob Dunn at bdunn@berkshireagle.com, at [@BobDunn413](https://twitter.com/BobDunn413) on Twitter and 413-496-6249.

[Adams-Cheshire Regional School Committee Abuse Response January 2018](https://www.scribd.com/document/368789946/Adams-Cheshire-Regional-School-Committee-Abuse-Response-January-2018#from_embed) (https://www.scribd.com/document/368789946/Adams-Cheshire-Regional-School-Committee-Abuse-Response-January-2018#from_embed) by The Berkshire Eagle (https://www.scribd.com/user/100475060/The-Berkshire-Eagle#from_embed) on Scribd

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