

JFK teachers say school targets them for reprisals

By Marie Villani

At least two teachers at John F. Kennedy High School say they have been unfairly targeted for punishment after publicly criticizing several school administrators in a *New York Times* article last month. They are considering filing a harassment suit.

One teacher, Basil Apostle, said he received a rating of "unsatisfactory" for his classroom teaching several weeks after the article appeared. Another teacher, who also believes she was punished unfairly, did not want to be named.

The article, which appeared in *The Times* on Feb. 8, re-examined an incident last year in which the English Regents grades of at least 16 students were changed by a new assistant principal of English, Rhokeisha Ford. The changes were done with the permission of the school principal but without the knowledge of any teachers. The situation led to a teacher protest outside the school last year, and to the reassignment of Maria Colon, then the school's United Federation of Teachers representative, who led the charge against the administration.

A city Department of Education investigation found no wrongdoing on the part of Principal Anthony Rotunno, but another investigation to see if scores were raised to improve the school's academic standings is still ongoing.

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For *The Times*' article, the reporter interviewed five longtime English teachers — three of whom are still at the school. One teacher, Eileen Sokoloff, who is retired, is quoted extensively; the others are not directly quoted.

Mr. Apostle has worked at Kennedy for four years. Although he wasn't quoted in the article, he believes the mention of his name led to his first unsatisfactory rating at Kennedy after a routine classroom inspection by Ms. Ford

last month.

Ms. Ford found 13 deficiencies in Mr. Apostle's classroom, including several students sleeping during his lecture, he said. Mr. Apostle said he woke those students up, and that many of the other deficiencies have no validity.

"I'm not going to say I'm a perfect teacher or the best teacher," Mr. Apostle said. "I'm a good teacher, better than the average. She has no clue what's going on."

Neither Ms. Ford nor Mr. Rotunno returned calls seeking

comment.

In *The Times*' article, one of the biggest complaints Kennedy teachers had was Ms. Ford's lack of knowledge about her specialty. According to the piece, she was a substitute teacher in 1999 then spent four years as a certified special education teacher, then came to Kennedy last year as an assistant principal of English.

After reading the article, Assemblyman Jeffrey Dinowitz sent a letter to Mr. Rotunno, the city Department of Education and

Yvonne Torres, the newly named Region 1 superintendent, questioning Ms. Ford's lack of experience.

Ms. Torres responded with a letter dated March 1, bulletting Ms. Ford's qualifications, including her certification in administration and supervision and an undergraduate minor degree in English. She will also obtain her certification in English shortly, Ms. Torres said.

The teachers are in the process of accumulating evidence to support their harassment claim. They

will give it to Lynne Winderbaum, the district representative for the teachers union, who will decide with her staff whether the teachers have a strong case and if they will go forward and file the claim.

But Ms. Winderbaum, who has also taught at Kennedy for many years, already believes the claim holds water.

"It certainly seems to me that the first adverse actions against them are occurring right after they spoke out and that's a matter of concern for me," she said.