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Was JFK whistleblower punished?

By JOHN DeSIO

One teacher at John F. Kennedy High School is learning a hard lesson.

If you speak up about an outrage in your school, expect retaliation.

Reports have circulated for months that English grades on Regents examinations had been unethically changed from failing to passing by faculty at the school.

Those reports have apparently turned out to be true. At the center of a Department of Education investigation is Rhokeisha Ford, a 31-year-old assistant principal for English hired last year to serve under Kennedy Principal Anthony Rotunno.

Ford, with Rotunno's approval, raised 16 grades from failing to passing on the January 2005 English Regents exam, purportedly to boost graduation rates at the school. Rotunno has denied that graduation rates were the issue, but rather that the grades should have been changed because they were not graded properly in the first place.

One of the teachers who blew the whistle on these grade changing shenanigans was Basil Apostle, who spoke out in the *New York Times* and elsewhere about Ford's actions.

Now, after a stellar career of teaching, Apostle has received a bad evaluation report for his work at Kennedy High School this year.

And the evaluation was handled by Ford, leading Apostle and others to wonder if this was little more than retaliation against Apostle for telling the truth about the grade-changing scam.

Ford begins her review with three very small positive notes, commending Apostle for his class' good attendance, using a visual aid, and that every student had a copy of the book.

Following that, Ford launched into a three-page tirade critical of everything Apostle did in the classroom.

"You failed to utilize praise to reward valid pupil input," wrote Ford at one point in the evaluation. "Phrases such as 'great reading,' 'well done,' 'good thinking' should be incorporated into your lesson with regularity."

Other portions of the evaluation are just as critical, with Ford attacking Apostle on every single thing she possibly could, to the point where it is obvious that she was hunting for things of which to be critical.

"The lesson ended arbitrarily at the bell and was totally devoid of a final summary or application activity," wrote Ford, criticizing Apostle for ending his class on time.

When asked if he felt he was being singled out by Ford for speaking his mind, Apostle summed his feelings up in one word.

"Absolutely," he said, adding that he would be submitting a harassment complaint to his union, the United Federation of Teachers, this week.

A main criticism of Ford has been that she was in no way qualified to be in a position to change those Regents grades in the first place.

Ford, a young teacher with no experience in English at any level, started in the education world as a substitute teacher in 1999 at M.S. 391 in Tremont, becoming a full-time teacher at the school in 2001 with a certification in special education.

She remained at M.S. 391 until 2004, when she took a manager's position in the Region 1 offices.

Ford then came to Kennedy High School in February 2004, having never been a specialist in the subject she would manage.