

Schools settle for \$1.78 million

Jonathan Rich
Times-News Staff Writer

The Henderson County School Board has agreed to pay a \$1.78 million settlement to the families of 17 children who were sexually molested by a former teaching assistant.

In a statement released Wednesday afternoon, both sides announced the civil lawsuit was resolved after several days of private mediation.

The total settlement for all the children involved is \$1,786,000, an amount which will be paid through insurance coverage for the School Board and school administrators.

A structured settlement in the case would pay each child named in the lawsuit an average of \$105,000, but that figure would be lower after deductions are made for attorney fees, the children's therapy bills and other expenses incurred during litigation. However, it is not clear if that is how the money would be distributed.

"The focus of the resolution was to provide for the interests of the children involved," the statement says. "The majority of the funds will be held, managed and distributed to meet the immediate and long-term needs of the children."

Laurence Freeman McKisson, 54, was convicted in January 2002 of molesting four young boys. Between 1995 and 2001, McKisson worked as a volunteer, student teacher, substitute teacher or reading assistant at Etowah, Bruce Drysdale, Dana and Edneyville elementary schools and Apple Valley Middle School.

McKisson is serving a 62-year prison sentence for the crimes. Thirty charges of molesting other children while he was employed by the school system were dropped after he was sentenced.

In May 2002 the parents of 17 children sexually molested by McKisson filed the civil lawsuit saying the school system failed to fully investigate his background and failed to properly supervise him.

In addition to the School Board and the school system administration, the lawsuit named Etowah Elementary principal Michael Thorpe, former Etowah Principal Malvern West, Dana Elementary Principal Noland Ramsey and former school system Personnel Director Doug Barker as defendants in the case.

All defendants in the case denied any liability and no determination of fault was established in the resolution of the lawsuit, according to the statement.

Schools Superintendent Tom Burnham said he could not comment on the proceedings. Phone calls to School Board attorneys were not returned Wednesday night. **Lionel Lofton**, one of four lawyers in the case, also declined to elaborate on the specifics of the settlement.

"Quite frankly there isn't anything beyond what was said in the news release that we are in a position to say," **Lofton** said, speaking for the other lawyers representing the children.

As with any case involving minors, all terms and conditions of the settlement must be reviewed and approved by a Superior Court judge before they become official.

School board vice chairwoman Melissa Maurer said she was relieved the lawsuit has been resolved.

"I'm glad that this is over and we can put it behind us," Maurer said. "I'm glad that these children can be adequately taken care of now and in the future."

"We wanted it resolved in a way that would not cause the children any more hardship than they had already suffered," School Board member Ken Butcher said. "A terrible thing happened and our concern was to get the healing process for them and the whole school system started."

The mediation talks, which Superior Court Judge Zoro Guice Jr. had ordered must take place before March 1, came days after the Times-News filed a motion asking the court to lift an order that sealed all personnel files in the civil lawsuit.

In that motion the newspaper asked for access to documents exchanged by lawyers in the case, not any information regarding the children who were abused.

Times-News attorney Mark Prak said even though the lawsuit against the school system has been settled, the newspaper will continue to seek information about McKisson's supervision while he worked in Henderson County.

"The fact that the parties have agreed to settle the case does not moot our motion to intervene for access to the documents we have requested," Prak said. "We fully intend to bring those matters to a hearing so that the public can be informed of all the facts related to the school board's supervision, or lack thereof, of Mr. McKisson."