

# DAILY BREEZE

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## Harbor City family sues church school, alleges cover-up of child-on-child sex acts

A Harbor City family filed a lawsuit this week against pastors, teachers and directors of the First Lutheran Church Child Development Center in Carson for allegedly allowing widespread sexual conduct between preschool students over several months.

Five more families are expected to file similar lawsuits in the near future, and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department is investigating whether school officials neglected the children and covered up instances of sexual abuse.

The suit was filed Tuesday, the same day the sheriff's Special Victims Unit began its investigation into allegations that the school turned a blind eye to students performing oral sex on other students. The lawsuit alleges intentional infliction of emotional distress, negligence, sexual battery and assault, among other things.

The school, at 19707 S. Central Ave., will shut its doors on Friday, amid the allegations and a barrage of state licensing citations for offenses over the past six months. School officials downplayed the sex abuse concerns and denied that the closure was due to the citations and criminal accusations.

"There were no abuse issues; there were child-on-child inappropriate issues in October, which were reported," said church President Patricia Jernigan. "We're going into inactive status because we don't have a director. The purpose of the inactive status is to reassess operations. We'd like to reopen in September."

Greg Owen of the Valencia law firm of Owen, Patterson & Owen is representing parents suing the school. He claims the school administration lied and covered up major problems for months.

The issues began when a female student allegedly performed oral sex acts on a classmate. The boy told his parents, who informed the school's administration in June. The school did not report it to appropriate regulating agencies, according to official reports.

The school also didn't properly report a similar incident in September, Owen said. But things were taken more seriously in October, after a teacher walked into a bathroom and saw a boy with his pants and underwear pulled down, and a girl with her mouth around his genitalia.

"That's when the situation blew up," Owen said. "School administration said it was that one isolated incident. That was a complete lie."

Owen said the practice had actually become common in the school by October, as the 4- and 5-year-olds taught each other how to do it and convinced more students to participate.

"There was oral copulation in the school yard, the school room, bathroom," Owen said. "It sounds like it was rampant. These children developed their own grooming system. They'd bring another child into the circle, make friends with them and then say: 'Either you do this to me or I'm not going to be your friend.'"

Sheriff's Sgt. Dan Scott said his investigators will look into whether molestation was occurring in the home of any of the children, and whether school officials appropriately reported these issues.

The county Department of Social Services Community Care Licensing Division issued seven citations against the school in January, and threatened to revoke its license to operate unless the issues were fixed by Feb. 11. Instead, the school closed its doors.

The citations were for violations such as leaving students alone with volunteers, disciplining children by depriving them of playtime (which is not allowed), and insufficient staffing.

After the October sex abuse incident, the school's administration required teachers to monitor students in the bathroom and held a class about the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touching. But parents said they weren't given accurate information about what had been going on. Officials said county Department of

Children and Family Services workers interviewed several children and their families.

One parent, who did not want to be identified, said she is disappointed because the small school, which has been in operation for 18 years, used to be very good.

“It’s unfortunate all this stuff happened under our noses,” she said. “It used to be a good school. My daughter was reading at a fifth-grade level in kindergarten. It just seems like there were a lot of lies. They should have hired more help. They never told the other parents what it was, that there was an act. It was kind of cryptic. I trusted that they would do the right thing.”

Now, parents are scrambling to find new schools for their children, and to deal with the emotional turmoil brought by the allegations and months of confusion surrounding them.

“It’s a mess,” said Richard McCarthy, who filed Tuesday’s lawsuit on behalf of himself and his son. “I had to rip him out of school, away from his friends. I’m not even sure I can get him in school because the state labeled him a predator.”

McCarthy’s son mimicked what the girl did to him on another student, and that has to be reported to his future schools.

“I just tell him those bad things happened and not to let anybody touch him,” McCarthy said. “I feel like I kinda failed him. I’m supposed to protect him from this kinda stuff. Who would ever expect it to happen?”