



The Times

School principal filed complaint against alleged catnapping cop

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BY EVA LOAYZA

TRENTON -- A middle school principal has accused Capt. Paul Messina of demeaning behavior following an incident in which she claims Messina denigrated her, a school security guard and the police officers under his command.

More troubling, the principal said, was the lack of reaction from the police director and the mayor.

Maryann Klaus, principal of Grace Dunn Middle School, sent a letter to Police Director Joseph Santiago and Mayor Douglas H. Palmer on May 21 to file an official complaint against Messina.

A copy of Klaus's letter was sent to The Times yesterday. Reached at home, Klaus confirmed the incident.

In the letter, Klaus asked to meet with Santiago and Messina "to foster an understanding about any further interaction between him and the public." Klaus said it was disappointing no one thought it merited a response.

"It was clear to me the director and the mayor had no interest in how he acted, treated me or the men under his command," said Klaus. A letter was also sent to the city council, but Klaus was told they had not received it.

Santiago said he vaguely remembered the letter, but "it never came to me as an internal affairs complaint."

He defended Messina, saying people are taking advantage of recent media reports about him to pile it on.

"You want to hang him before he gets a fair trial," said Santiago of the media.

This is the latest in a week of mishaps for Messina.

A picture of Messina allegedly sleeping while on duty was posted online Monday. This was just months after a 4-year-old video of Messina napping on the job was posted on the YouTube Web site. Messina acknowledged wrongdoing and received a written reprimand for the 2003 incident. The latest incident is under investigation.

Several media outlets have covered the story, including television stations in Philadelphia and New York.

Mayor Douglas H. Palmer said through spokesman Peter Page it would be inappropriate to comment because of the ongoing investigation. Attempts to reach Messina through the spokesman were unsuccessful.

Klaus said her verbal confrontation with Messina occurred after an incident at the school in May in which several students attacked a security guard after he broke up a fight between two other students. That guard called another guard who helped disperse the students. When Klaus learned of the incident, she told the guard to report it to the police. He did, and officers came to the school on May 18 to question the students involved, she said.

Klaus said Messina showed up later. She said he was upset the guard had not called the police immediately. He was also upset at her for not contacting Howard White, chief of security for the district, about the incident, she said.

Klaus said she admitted the guard made a mistake and assured Messina it would not happen again. She also told him she does not call White about every incident, and that while guards are in the school, they are under her authority.

Klaus said Messina insulted the guard, and assumed an attitude that was demeaning and degrading.

"He talked to his men like he talked to the guard," said Klaus. "He was staring at me like I was a criminal."

She said he eventually apologized, but then complained to the superintendent that she had been rude to him.

"The school is my concern, not Capt. Messina," said Klaus. "I can't allow him to upset the relationship I have with my people and his officers. That relationship is more important to me than his ego."

Santiago said they've had problems in the past with school administrators not notifying the police of incidents.

He intended to hash out the issue with the superintendent, not the principal, he said.

Santiago said Klaus's claims are her characterization of what happened.

"The reality is he's not perfect," said Santiago. "Everyone has their moments."

"Maybe he can be a little rough, a little tough, but he is the most effective police manager I have," he added.

He said it was Messina who instituted police patrols in the schools, the safety corridor at Dunn, and brought Home Depot for beautification projects in Chambersburg and Walnut Avenue. "This is the same guy," he said.

He said what saddens him is attention is being taken away from the accomplishments of the department.

Contact Eva Loayza at eloayza@njtimes.com or (609) 989-5717.

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