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Solicitor: Charges against former Kell principal lacked evidence

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by Lindsay Field

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Charges against former Kell High School principal Trudie Donovan have been dismissed by the Cobb Solicitor General's Office.

Donovan, who resigned last year after 34 years with Cobb County Schools, turned herself in to the Cobb County Jail on misdemeanor charges of failure to report child abuse.

She was accused of knowing that former Kell teacher James Chadwick Brigham slapped a student's buttocks and another student in the face in his classroom last May.

Brigham was arrested on felony sexual battery and two counts of simple battery.

According to Cobb County State Court documents, the single charge against Donovan was dismissed on March 27 when the state determined the case lacked sufficient evidence to prosecute.

"After an extensive investigation, the state is unable to pursue this charge due to lack of facts or supporting evidence to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant violated the 'willfully and knowingly' portion of (the mandatory reporting law)," Assistant Solicitor General Latonia Hines wrote on the document.

It was signed by Cobb State Court Judge Kathryn Tanksley.

"It is just the greatest thing that could have happened after the worst thing that could have ever happened to her," said Stanley Wrinkle, a retired Cobb Schools assistant superintendent.

Wrinkle said he was surprised and "brokenhearted" when he first heard the charge because he knew Donovan to be a wonderful teacher, principal and person.

"For this to have fallen on her the way it did was just a tragedy, and unfortunately things are going to have to happen to prevent this from occurring (again)," he said.

Wrinkle declined to say what the district could do to prevent other teachers or administrators from being falsely accused in Cobb schools.

"This just changed a person's life," he said. "There is no telling how much money she spent (defending herself), but to treat someone like a common criminal is beyond words of horror."

Members of Cobb's two education organizations agree.

"I'm pleased and actually we expected it because what we've read, there was no evidence of any criminal intent," said John Adams with Educators First. "We're thrilled that a veteran educator has been vindicated."

Connie Jackson with the Cobb County Association of Educators said she thought the district was "overreaching" when they filed these charges against the long-term educator.

"I think that she was an excellent educator and administrator and having the criminal charges against her dropped, I'm sure is a great relief for her," she said.

Donovan was named Kell's principal in 2006 after serving as an associate principal at Harrison High for four years. She started in the Cobb County School District in 1978 as a teacher at Walton

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High School, where she stayed until 2000.

She also served as an administrative assistant and assistant principal at South Cobb High in her 30-plus years with the district.

Donovan not the only one being accused

Awtrey Middle principal Jeff Crawford is appealing similar charges for failure to report an alleged off-campus sexual assault by one student against another. In Crawford's case, however, the school district never filed any criminal charges.

Cobb Schools is trying to suspend him one day without pay for not reporting the alleged incident involving two seventh-graders.

Crawford's disciplinary hearing is scheduled for mid-May, and Marietta attorneys Justin O'Dell and Leslie O'Neal say their client couldn't be any more disconnected from the case, and therefore is not guilty of any allegations. Three months before Donovan retired, Tapp Middle School principal Dr. Jerry Dority was also charged criminally for failure to report.

Atlanta attorney Angela Johnson said Dority's case hasn't been dismissed, but she hopes the Solicitor General's Office finds reason to take the same action and throw it out of court.

"I'm hoping they will review the facts of Dr. Dority's case and see that she's eligible for (a dismissal) as well," Johnson said Monday. "I can't imagine any reason why she wouldn't be."

Dority and Tapp counselor Yatta Collins were accused of knowing that a child was molested and attempted suicide but did not file a report with police or the Department of Family and Children Services.

Dority and Collins were both fired after a three-school board member panel decided to uphold the administration's decision on appeal.

Greg Leontovich is another former Cobb Schools employee who lost his job as a result of district allegations. The 30-year educator was accused of child molestation and lost his job, profession, savings and reputation, but was later acquitted by a Cobb County jury in March 2008.

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Tanksley seems to be very soft on crime.

How did she get her job anyway?

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