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WESTWORD

WEB EXCLUSIVES

Long-term sub relieved of duties

Maternity leave replacement's essay assignment deemed inappropriate

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After giving a writing prompt administrators deemed inappropriate, a long-term substitute English teacher was fired March 22.

The teacher gave the controversial assignment to his fifth-period American Literature and Composition (ALC) class on March 6. The writing prompt asked students to write about advice they would give teenagers about sex, including references to their own sexual experiences. According to director of English and Reading Jennifer Firer, the substitute intended this assignment to help students think like Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, which the class is currently studying.

The teacher was hired as a long-term substitute for Wileen Hsing, who went on maternity leave in January. Lia Gerambia took over Hsing's two sophomore classes (after working part-time during the first semester), and the fired substitute taught Hsing's ALC classes, one of which was the regular-level class that was given the controversial prompt and two honors-level classes that were not assigned the aforementioned essay.

The fill-in was hired after student teaching at Niles North in the spring of 2005. Firer said former West English teacher Pat Flynn had planned to take over Hsing's ALC classes, but he was diagnosed with cancer last November and died shortly thereafter.

Junior Alex Arsenijevic is in the fifth-period ALC class. He said the whole class was taken aback by the nature of the assignment.

"He gave us the option to write about what teachers expect you to be like—if you didn't feel comfortable writing about [the sexually suggestive prompt]—and you were supposed to link each piece of advice to a personal experience of yours," he said. "I did the assignment, but I wrote about the teacher thing instead."

Firer said that she was notified about the prompt last Wednesday, more than two weeks after it was assigned. She said that a student's guardian had contacted the student's counselor, who reported it to Assistant Principal of Pupil Personnel Services Paula Miller, who then informed her.

According to Firer, she notified the substitute after school on Wednesday—10 minutes after being informed of the essay assignment—that Miller would be commencing a harassment investigation immediately. Following the investigation, Firer informed the teacher on Thursday morning that he was relieved of his duties. "I did not allow him back in the classroom after learning about the assignment," she added.

A short-term substitute teacher took over the classes Thursday and Friday while the school district searched for a long-term replacement and Firer prepared a letter to send home to the students' parents. On Thursday, Firer and Miller showed a PowerPoint presentation to the fifth-period students on harassment and the students' rights.

"It's important to us that they're safe in this building," Firer said.

Firer explained that long-term substitutes are required to teach the books that the teacher on leave had ordered, but that they are free to develop their own lesson plans.

The school's English teachers reflected on the appropriateness of the assignment.

"[It is] offensive to the point where I feel my integrity as a teacher has been compromised," Dana DesJardins said.

Paul Wack saw little educational value in the prompt. He said that "totally, unequivocally, positively never" should such an assignment be given.

"[Teachers] have to rely on common sense and an understanding that their students are still children," Wack said. "[There is a] difference between giving an open-ended assignment out of a lack of thoughtfulness on the teacher's part and consciously giving an assignment that's inappropriate."

Wack also noted that the Illinois State Board of Education mandates that teachers report harmful activities involving students if they are made aware of them. He said teachers need to be very careful about assignments that might lead students to share their personal experiences.

One silver lining, Rachel Gross said, was that the incident led to a "teachable moment."

"Our students need more awareness about how to advocate for themselves," Gross added.

The delay in reporting the validity of the essay topic worried many in the English Department. Firer said that there was little doubt that the assignment needed to be called into question.

"It was a completely inappropriate assignment," she said. "Obviously, we needed to do some education," she said, referring to the harassment presentation.

