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Lawsuit highlights challenge of autistic students in public schools

April 19, 2011 | By Rafael A. Olmeda, Sun Sentinel

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He said teachers and aides are trained to look for cues that indicate an autistic child's behavior is about to become problematic. The cues are different for each child.

The aides who follow some autistic students from classroom to classroom in mainstream middle and high school settings are typically not college graduates and not well-paid, Grigull said. "It's one of the hardest jobs. The pay is not high. But in many ways they are the lifeblood of what we do for autistic children in the classroom."

Sabo was on the job at Monarch High School from Feb. 2007 to October 2008, when she resigned amid the accusations raised by the student in her care. She was earning about \$13,000 a year in the full-time job.

According to the lawsuit, Sabo complained to school administrators about her assignment, calling him "gross" and "crazy" in front of the boy and in front of teachers. Then came the incident with the chair.

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The boy's lawyers, Leonel Plasencia and Paul Sopp, said the aide was being sued for inflicting distress and the Broward school district was being sued for failing to provide adequate training to Sabo.

Grigull said teachers are trained to handle autistic and other special needs students as part of their undergraduate and graduate education. Specialized behavioral management training is also offered to teachers and to aides throughout the year. Palm Beach offers similar training for teachers and aides.

The lawsuit was settled last year, with the school district agreeing to pay \$25,000. But a guardian ad-litem for the boy determined in December that the settlement, which included attorney's fees, was not in the boy's best interest.

"I think \$25,000 is far too low" to compensate the boy for what he allegedly suffered, said the guardian, Matthew Scott, in a federal court filing.

The case was reopened and is pending in federal court. School officials declined to discuss the open case.

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