



MEDIA STATEMENT

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Today, Umina Legal, PLLC filed suit in the United States District Court for the Northern District of West Virginia on behalf of Dr. Donna Heston, Superintendent of Marion County Schools, and Kristin DeVaul, the County's Administrative Assistant of Human Resources, against the Marion County Board of Education and Board members Donna Costello, Kevin Rogers, and James Saunders.

These are two women who answer, every working day, to the people they have now been forced to sue — in the small community where they live and work. As the complaints set out, for three and a half years, three elected members of the Board turned the authority of their offices on a false accusation about the private lives of the women who serve under them.

A Board member summoned the Superintendent, told her “it’s not a debate,” and interrogated her for twenty-five minutes about a relationship that never existed. Board members combed through two women’s vacation photos. Two of them drove to a high school and spent ninety-eight minutes behind a closed door with a subordinate, disclosing how they intended to vote on the Superintendent’s contract months before the public heard a word. “We’re not supposed to say stuff,” one of them said, on tape — and kept talking.

The cost was not abstract. The rumor traveled through the district’s schools for three and a half years while the very officials responsible for the district’s governance spread it rather than correcting it — until the Superintendent was made to stand before her own employees and deny a fabricated story about her private life. Her performance evaluation, which state law requires to be conducted in private, was instead streamed live to the public. And Ms. DeVaul, who has given this school system eighteen years, was ordered confined to her office during the workday — forbidden to travel to professional meetings, barred from the schools she was hired to serve, her attendance at a single professional conference questioned in executive session — while male administrators traveled the state without a second look.

Eleven days after rating Dr. Heston’s performance as meeting or exceeding every goal, those same three members voted to end her tenure. They have never given the public a reason. After she asserted her rights, she received the shortest contract the law allows — and, weeks later, behind another closed door, was told “we are your boss” and “it’s not going to get easier.”

None of this rests on our clients’ word. The complaints are built on the Board members’ own recorded statements, their own text messages, the written statement of a sitting Board member, and the Board’s own official minutes. Asked on tape whether male administrators who traveled and stayed together were involved with each other, a Board member answered, “Well, that’s not my business.” The private lives of two women, apparently, were. And this July, the Board’s newly elected President was overheard on an open telephone line repeating the same false rumor to others — then acknowledged in writing that he had.

Dr. Heston and Ms. DeVaul are still at work, serving the students and families of Marion County, as they have every day of this campaign against them. They will not be commenting; they have answered for their private lives long enough. All inquiries should be directed to counsel. The complaints are public records on the Court’s docket. We encourage anyone who wants to understand what these two women have endured to read the Board members’ own words.

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FOR JUSTICE