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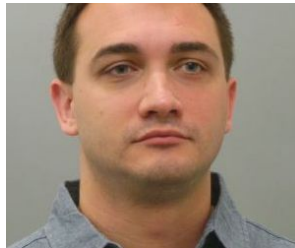
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## Lawsuit alleges Principia staffer assaulted underage student, had sex parties

October 22, 2015 4:15 am • By Robert Patrick

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**Zachary Retzlaff**, a former Principia school employee, was charged with statutory rape.

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older and younger members of the

**TOWN AND COUNTRY** • A \$1 million lawsuit says a Principia upper-school employee sexually assaulted an underage student more than 40 times on or around the campus here, choked her as part of sex play and held group sex parties for students.

The lawsuit, filed Oct. 16 in St. Louis County Circuit Court, says that the school's only response upon finding out was a verbal warning to the employee, Zachary Retzlaff, to "knock it off" and "cut it out."

Retzlaff, now 33, was charged in June with statutory rape in a case that does not make reference to the school.

The civil suit identifies the girl only as "Jane Doe." It was filed in her name by her parents, as her legal guardians. They live in St. Louis County.

It also says she has run away and wants to marry Retzlaff. She has sought a legal order of protection against her parents.

The suit says she was a student at the time at the private Christian Science school at 13201 Clayton Road and was 16 during at least part of the illicit relationship.

Principia Principal Travis Brantingham was said to be unavailable Wednesday and did not return a reporter's call seeking comment. Principia President Jonathan Palmer did not return a reporter's phone message or email.

An email from Laurel Walters, the school's marketing and communications director, said, "Zachary Retzlaff is a former employee of Principia. He worked in our Telecommunications Department and was never a teacher or a coach. His position did not involve contact with students at Principia School."

Retzlaff was listed as the telecommunications manager in a 2012-13 catalog from Principia College, a related school in Elsah, Ill. A December 2014 publication lists him as the director of the network and telecom team there.

The lawsuit alleges that school officials knew Retzlaff had improper relationships with students before. It says he used alcohol to lure two other underage students into spending time with him before having sex with them. It was "common knowledge" at the school that Retzlaff had sex with students and that several school staffers or officials knew about it, the suit says.

In June, county prosecutors accused Retzlaff of having sex

football team. [Read more](#)



with a girl younger than 17 from July 1, 2014, to Feb. 16, 2015, and charged him with one felony count of statutory rape. The charging documents do not give Retzlaff's title or any details of the alleged crime or victim. Retzlaff pleaded not guilty and was released on \$25,000 cash bail.

Court documents show that prosecutors are seeking to have Retzlaff returned to jail because they believe he violated an order prohibiting contact with the girl in the criminal case — and that she may be living at his house.

The dwelling at his address in unincorporated west St. Louis County, near Edgar M. Queeny County Park, appeared vacant and had a “for sale” sign in the front yard when a reporter knocked on the door Wednesday night.

His attorney, John Schleiffarth, did not respond to a phone call and email seeking comment Wednesday.

The lawsuit says that Retzlaff met the teen through the school and spent time with her off campus at the home of his aunt, who is the school's director of admissions. The suit says Retzlaff has other family connections at Principia. His uncle is a former trustee, and two other relatives work there, it says.

The girl began babysitting Retzlaff's three children and cleaning his house, the suit says. His wife died in early 2014, according to public records.

At some point, Retzlaff “began sexually assaulting” the girl, the suit says, and did so from July 2014 to May 2015.

Retzlaff introduced the girl to sado-masochistic play, including choking her into unconsciousness before having sex with her, the suit claims.

He also invited other minors “to join him in ‘group sex’ with Ms. Doe, including other Principia students,” on and off campus, the suit says.

The former student has now abandoned her career plans and has run away from home, the lawsuit says. It also says she wants to finish high school as quickly as possible so that she can marry Retzlaff and care for his children.

The suit accuses Principia of interfering with both the civil and criminal cases.

With the help of the lawyer son of Principia's in-house legal counsel, the teen has filed for an order of protection against her parents and has filled out “an affidavit replete with factual omissions for their (Principia's) benefit,” the suit says.

That lawyer, Warren Popp, and his mother, Sharon Popp, did not return messages seeking comment.

The suit seeks more than \$1 million for a breach of the school's duty to provide a safe student environment as well as negligent hiring, retention and supervision of an employee and negligent supervision of a child.

One of the lawyers who filed the suit, [Matthew Radefeld](#), declined to comment.

Allegations of hazing at Principia's upper school in the summer of 2014 led to filing of felony charges in January against two teenage football players, and misdemeanor charges against a third, for incidents that allegedly included penetrating the anus of juveniles with objects and punching them. The three were expelled.

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