

Claims of teacher abuse a hoax

13 Whitehead 4th-graders face penalties

Editor's note

The Rockford Register Star was told about the investigation into alleged inappropriate touching by a substitute teacher at Whitehead Elementary School shortly after 5 p.m. Thursday.

Register Star editors discussed the matter and decided not to run a story on the incident in Friday's editions.

They believed the information came too late in the day

for the newspaper to gather enough information to publish a balanced report or for editors to make an informed assessment of how the potential story should be handled.

At issue was whether reporters could gather information from enough sources Thursday evening to ensure fairness to the teacher who was facing allegations that could ruin a career.

Our answer was no,

we would not be able to do that.

We were mindful, too, that similar allegations against an elementary school teacher in Belvidere recently turned out to be false.

The outcome is that today's story is the result of a full day of information gathering, one that tells readers the teacher was innocent rather than one that would have left him twisting in the wind.

By SCOTT WILLIAMS

Rockford Register Star

ROCKFORD — Fourth-grade students at Whitehead Elementary School are facing disciplinary action after they allegedly organized a campaign falsely accusing a teacher of sexual abuse.

Thirteen students — nine girls and four boys — could be suspended from school for targeting a substitute teacher because they did not like him, said school district

spokesman Jim Jennings.

Some of the students giggled and were overheard boasting about "getting rid of the teacher" while officials investigated the children's claims that the teacher had touched them improperly.

"It's just as serious for them to try to destroy a person," Jennings added. "They need to know right from wrong."

The exact form of discipline will be decided by

Whitehead Principal Glenda Hildreath, who could not be reached for comment Friday.

Parents of Whitehead students agreed with punishing the fourth-graders, most 9 or 10 years old.

"I don't think kids should be allowed to get away with anything like that," said Kathy Olson, mother of a fourth-grader in a different class.

A Rockford child psychologist said even at such a young age, children know

enough about sexual abuse to understand that it would create problems for someone accused.

Dr. Donald Pearson speculated that creating problems was what Whitehead students intended for the substitute teacher.

"It puts them in a position of control," he said. "These kids are savvy."

The allegations began to

Please see Teacher, 4A ➤