

Fired PB teacher awarded \$337,000 by jury



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Sun Sentinel
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- Jury says teacher was not retaliated against but should get \$337,000
- Jury: Palm Beach County schools failed to provide teacher with accommodations

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Paula Prudente lost her teaching job and her state license after a series of inflammatory emails, but now a jury says the **Palm Beach County** School District owes her \$337,000 in back pay and damages.

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A **Palm Beach County** jury determined last week that the school district failed to provide proper accommodations that Prudente, 59, needed to be successful. Prudente suffers from **asthma** and **depression** but was forced to teach at Spanish River High in **Boca Raton** in a 1960s portable infested with mold, mildew, rotting wood, termites and bugs.

The jury awarded her \$265,000 for lost wages and benefits and \$72,000 for emotional pain and mental anguish. Prudente, a teacher in the district since 1978, was fired in February 2013..

But the same jury ruled against Prudente in her claim that the district's decision to fire her was retaliatory.

What happens next remains unclear. The state Department of Education permanently revoked her teaching license last July, making her ineligible to return to the classroom. She said she will try to persuade the state to reverse that action. A spokeswoman for the education department said she is unaware of the state ever reinstating a license once it's been revoked.

Prudente also has been applying, so far unsuccessfully, for district-level jobs that don't require a teaching certificate.

"I think (the School District) should retract all the wrong and false information they've filed to revoke my certificate," she said.

The school district isn't ready to write Prudente a check.

"We are disappointed that the jury chose to award back pay and compensation for pain and suffering on a failure to accommodate her handicap claim, a decision that we contend is not supported by the evidence or the law," district spokesman Alex Sanchez said. "The school district will appeal the verdict."

Prudente's problems began in 2008, when she used district email to send out a cartoon and poem that portrayed President Barack Obama in a negative light during his political campaign. In 2009-10, she was again accused of sending co-workers inappropriate and harassing emails. Both cases were settled out of court, with a 10-day suspension.

But in 2011, the district alleged Prudente had returned to her email attacks. They said she sent numerous hostile and confusing emails to staff and left one employee a three-minute threatening voice mail.

"She has repeatedly abused School District email...and she has repeatedly been ordered to stop," state administrative law judge Robert Meale wrote in a decision last year that upheld her firing.

But Prudente and her lawyer, Sid Garcia, argued the district was trying to stop her from filing complaints about such issues as the condition of her classroom, possible overbilling by an insurance company and concerns she had about district management.

"The School Board went out of the way to get her certification pulled on emails all based on legitimate complaints," Prudente said.

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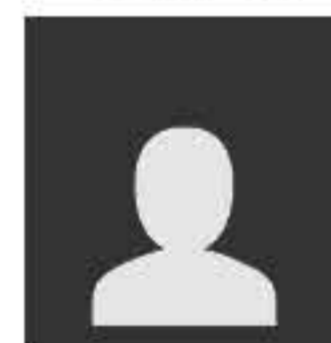
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