

Webster's Gumina is stepping down

Superintendent accused of steering investigation

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Webster Central School District Superintendent Carmen Gumina hurriedly announced his retirement Thursday, days after a former teacher who was exonerated of child sex abuse charges sued the district in federal court and accused Gumina of steering the investigation because both men were sleeping with the same district faculty member.

Gumina, a former student, teacher and principal in the district as well as its representative in the Monroe County Legislature, wrote in a letter to staff: "I've realized that I just don't have the fight left in my soul. My 'tank' is empty, and I think it's because I've left everything out there in the district with you and the students."

Current Deputy Superintendent Brian Neenan will serve as interim superintendent.

The former teacher and coach, Kali Watkins, alleged in his lawsuit that Gumina and other district and town officials "subject(ed him) to public humiliation and financial ruin all because of personal animosity and a reckless and malicious investigation."

Specifically, Watkins alleged that Gumina had a grudge against him because both men were having a sexual relationship with the same woman, also a district employee.

In his lawsuit, Watkins painted the district, and Webster Schroeder High School in particular, as a den of intrigue where many faculty members — including himself and Gumina — were in sexual relationships with one another. "Leaks, rumors, and unfounded sexual innuendo permeat(ed) the halls and classrooms of WSHS" after the investigation began, the complaint alleged.

A statement from Board of Education President Tammy Gurowski released Thursday said: "The Webster CSD Board of Education expresses its sincere appreciation to Dr. Gumina for more than three decades of service and commitment to thousands of Webster students and families. "We wish him well as he begins this next chapter and thank him for making a difference in our schools and community."

Cease and desist letters

The Watkins case is one of several elements of a political vortex in Webster with Gumina near the center.

"There's nothing I can write that won't be called ironic or misquoted, analyzed, mocked, and even turned around because when people have an agenda or narrative based in cruelty, they'll use what they can to tear down and destroy," Gumina wrote in his farewell letter to staff.

There is a hotly contested school board election in May, including a faction loyal to Gumina and another opposing him. In 2019 Gumina found himself in controversy after seeking to obtain a school board member's email communications through a Freedom of Information request.

Webster is home to some of the area's most fervent opponents of pandemic-related restrictions in school and elsewhere, a source of turmoil that, according to the district, has boiled over into conspiracy theory and defamation.

The district sent cease-and-desist letters earlier this month to at least two vocal critics, cautioning that if they did not stop calling Gumina "corrupt, a crook and a liar," among other things, the district would sue for defamation.

At an April 22 school board meeting, Gurowski said it was the board's duty to "protect the district superintendent."

"Rumors and negativity can threaten the respect we value so deeply in this district," she said. "We are examples and role models to the young

Watkins was found not guilty of any criminal charges by a jury in August 2019. He was accused of raping a girl who played on the Webster Schroder High School basketball team that Watkins coached, but his defense team was able to show that he had a solid alibi for much of the afternoon when the attack was alleged to have happened in a locker room.

Watkins also sued Webster police, alleging that the department overlooked and ignored evidence of his innocence and unfairly targeted him.

Gumina's retirement is effective Friday. He was appointed superintendent on an interim basis in 2014 after serving several terms in the Legislature, first as a Democrat and then after 2010 as a Republican. He then stepped into the superintendent role permanently in 2015.

Gumina did not answer a call to his personal cell phone Thursday morning. He also deleted his official Twitter account, from which he was fond of sending out humorous snow day announcements.

Kamran Hashmi, the attorney for Watkins, said he would not speculate on the motivation for Gumina's retirement.

Watkins, he said, did not file the lawsuit out of "a vindictive desire" to impact the careers of individuals.

"He wants to reclaim his life," Hashmi said. Still, Hashmi said, there were clear conflicts of interest, such as those detailed in the lawsuit, with school officials responsible for the district's treatment of Watkins.

"How could these officials have found it to be okay to proceed with an investigation when they had biases and conflicts of interest?" he said. "They were dripping with them."

eyes that look up to us."

Contains reporting from staff writer Gary Craig. Contact staff writer Justin Murphy at jmurphy7@gannett.com.



Webster Central School District Superintendent Carmen Gumina talks about the school initial response to allegations of rape by a teacher and coach that has since been dismissed. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE