

The New Zealand Herald

Payout for bullied girl

By Abby Gillies



Angel Garden and Steve Paris were told none of their three daughters was welcome at the Rudolf Steiner School in Titirangi. Photo / Steven McNicholl

The family of an Auckland girl tormented by bullies, including one who threatened her with an axe, have received a payout and an admission the school failed her.

The girl, who was aged 8 at the time, was bullied by boys at the Titirangi Rudolf Steiner School.

She was kicked, punched, poked, hit and threatened.

Her parents, Steve Paris and Angel Garden, say that despite their efforts, the school did little to protect her.

After a three-and-a-half year battle, during which the couple took their complaint to the Human Rights Commission, they have reached an agreement with the school including a \$9000 payment and an admission of failure from management.

The couple are relieved the ordeal is over and say the outcome sends a strong message.

Ms Garden says they felt the school needed to be held to account for what happened, and she urges parents whose children say they are being bullied to "stick to your guns".

"It's my legal duty to protect my children. Why have I had to spend three and a half years just to do that?"

She said her daughter, now at another school, was still emotionally affected.

In a statement to the family, school manager Mark Thornton acknowledged some children in the class had displayed bullying behaviour.

He said that the girl's claims at the time "were honest and that her actions in reporting bullying were fully commensurate with the school policy, which emphasises the importance of telling both teachers and parents".

The parents said their daughter started at the Titirangi Rudolf Steiner School in November 2008.

A younger sibling was already at the kindergarten attached to the school and was happy.

However, their eldest daughter described being harassed by a group of boys in her class.

She was in a mixed-aged class of 17 boys and five girls; some of the boys were nearly two years older.

In one instance, she described being pushed from behind and held under water by two boys, and in another she said she was pushed down a bank.

Mr Paris said that during an outdoor activity, when pupils were using tools to make huts, his daughter was left alone with one of the bullies who threatened her with an axe.

"If your child's been threatened by a child with an axe, that's when you go to the school and ask what the hell is going on."

He and Ms Garden said that when they approached the school, their concerns fell on deaf ears.

A scheduled meeting with staff was cancelled, and a week after the axe incident, the couple received a letter telling them their three daughters - the 8-year-old, the girl in the kindergarten and another due to begin the following year - were no longer welcome at the

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school.

Mr Thornton said the school regretted not going through with the meeting to address the bullying.

The couple's continued attempts to address the bullying "arose out of their natural and dutiful concern as parents for the safety of their child and concern for the wellbeing of other children in the class," he told the couple in a statement.

The school was pleased the matter was closed, "particularly so for the children concerned", he said.

Rudolf Steiner schools

* Schools which follow the Rudolf Steiner approach follow a curriculum with an equal focus on art, science, nature and morality.

* New Zealand has 10 Steiner schools and 24 kindergartens. More than 3000 children attend them.

* Teaching in the schools follows the philosophy of its founder, the Austrian scientist Rudolf Steiner, and looks at the "whole child".

**Correction: In an earlier version of this story we reported that the Titirangi Rudolf Steiner School had been ordered by The Human Rights Commission to pay \$9000 to the family of a bullying victim. In fact, the \$9000 was an agreed sum settled upon between the school and family.*

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