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Activists sue Perry School Board over suspension

By Rebecca Neal

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Members of a grass-roots group who support suspended Perry Township Schools Superintendent H. Douglas Williams are taking their fight with the district's School Board to court.

What's Next:

A hearing on the lawsuit will be held at 1:30 p.m. May 9 in Superior Court 4 with Judge Cynthia Ayers presiding. The case is Take Back Perry Schools, Jennifer Mertz, Teri Margason, Chuck Stumpf and Tim Nance vs. Board of School Trustees of the Metropolitan School District of Perry Township.

On Monday, members of Take Back Perry Schools filed a lawsuit in Marion Superior Court, asking it to declare unlawful the board's conduct in putting Williams on indefinite administrative leave in November without charge.

"This lawsuit is the public trying to break the logjam about the superintendent," said the group's attorney, Ed DeLaney, during a news conference outside the City-County

Building in Downtown Indianapolis on Monday afternoon. "The school district needs to stop fiddling around looking for charges."

About 30 Perry Township residents gathered outside the City-County Building, applauding as DeLaney walked inside to file the paperwork.

Many in attendance wore orange, the official color of Take Back Perry Schools. Bob Willsey, a member of the group, said Take Back Perry Schools has raised about \$8,000 through word-of-mouth donations. The group has spent about \$6,000 so far to hire DeLaney and will now begin a concerted fundraising effort.

"We've told DeLaney we'll go to whatever lengths necessary to do this," said Willsey, 50, an investment adviser representative who served on the Perry Township School Board from 1998 to 2006.

The suit also asks the court to decide whether the district is entitled to reimbursement for costs related to Williams' suspension, including fees for two attorneys hired to investigate and advise the board regarding Williams.

"It's a reasonable assumption that if they'd had a good charge that they would have brought it by now," DeLaney said.

DeLaney said he had not spoken to Williams or his attorneys regarding the suit.

"I've just seen it," said board Vice President Nancy Walsh before Monday night's board meeting. "If in fact it is legitimate, if in fact it was filed, it's frivolous and costly to defend."

The board voted 4-3 to place Williams on indefinite paid administrative leave in November. Since then, the board has twice voted 4-3 against motions to reinstate Williams as superintendent.

Board meetings have been contentious since Williams was placed on leave, with members acting less than civil toward one another and the public angrily addressing members during comment sessions.

The lawsuit was mentioned only briefly during Monday's meeting, but tensions were strained as the board voted 4-3 against motions to change the bylaws to allow more public comment and to move from two meetings a month to one.

Williams has been Perry Township's superintendent since 1993 and was named state Superintendent of the Year in 2003. He earns about \$179,000 annually in salary and an annuity.

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