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Officials hit with \$83 million suit, state cuts grant A dark week for District 200

Ex-Johnson School family sues district for 2 kids' illnesses

by Jason Block

Just as Johnson Elementary was ready to open its doors for the 1998-99 school year, parents of two former Johnson students filed a lawsuit attempting to close those doors for good.

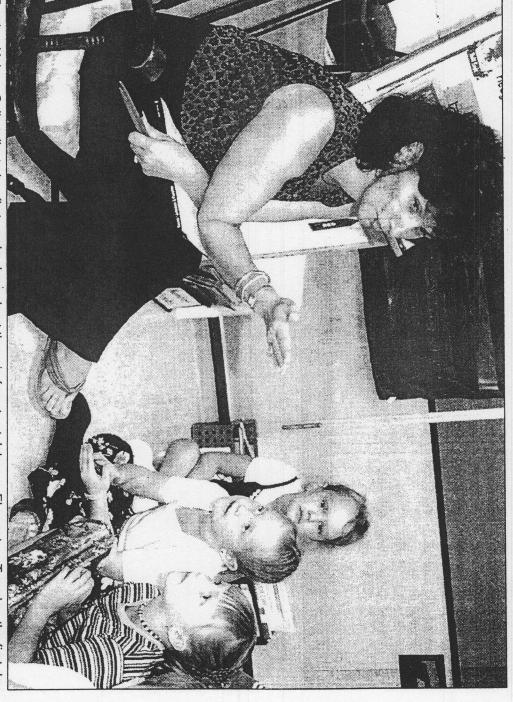
Janna and Miomir Andrejevic filed an \$83.65 million complaint on behalf of their two daughters—and the entire student body at Johnson—Monday with the federal district court in Chicago. The lawsuit claims that the illnesses that Katherine and Helen Andrejevic suffered in September 1997, which forced them to be removed from school and hometaught, were the fault of Community Unit School District 200.

"They have ignored repeated requests of parents, students and teachers to repair the problems," said Thomas Zimmerman Jr., lead attorney for the Andrejevic family.

Helen was a second-grader at Johnson on Sept. 6 last year when she was hospitalized for three days "and almost died" because of an allergic reaction to the mold in the building, Zimmerman said.

Little sister Katherine also had to be removed from the 8-year-old school a few days after beginning kindergarten after suffering a severe sinus infection and eczema, Zimmerman said. Katherine also testing positive for mold allergies, according to the suit.

Both girls were unable to return to the school because the physical ailments were caused by the "horrendous" conditions at Johnson, the suit said.



of school. Johnson is the subject of a lawsuit being brought against District 200 Teacher Helene Cella talks to her first grade class about the rain forests at Johnson Elementary Tuesday, the first day Press photo by Mark Busch

As part of the suit, the family is seeking injunctive relief, which would close the "sick school" until the problems are fixed, Zimmerman said. If they are not alleviated, then the parents are asking that the school be closed down and relo-

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the complaint. environmental conditions-18 percent of dents who were sickened by the school's Johnson's student body—are attached to Zimmerman said the names of 122 stu-In addition to Helen and Katherine,

girls' illnesses. senting District 200, said that the comthe conditions of the school caused the trict to prove it. He does not believe that reports done by experts hired by the disson School is safe, he said, and there are plaint is "specious and frivolous." John-Lawrence Jay Weiner, a lawyer repre-

renville, but some 2,000 miles away in ness of the case, Weiner said. San Diego, which just adds to the strange-The Andrejevics no longer live in War-

law," Weiner said. "Nothing even remoteas this complaint in 34 years of practicing become upset about their children unnecthe first day of school so all the parents ly close to an \$83.65 million suit filed on "I have never seen anything as bizarre

> assertion that the school was the cause of severe asthma attack, but, rather, the trying to dispute the fact that Helen had a Weiner said district officials are not

School. the Board of Education has been very was surprised by the complaint because concerns about air quality at Johnson aggressive in dealing with the issues and tions for District 200, said that the district Denie Young, director of communica-

said. Carpeting has been removed and the building has been improved since been reinsulated and air flow in and out of mental engineering last October, Young members and professionals in environquality team consisting of community since the board appointed an indoor air then, she said. replaced with tile, leaking pipes have More than \$600,000 has been spent

to school." students and parents have of going back opening day and the high expectations aggressive action out there," Young said. timing of this considering the board's 'The timing really puts a damper on the "We are just a little concerned with the

The suit had to be filed around this

man said. It was coincidence that it hapchildren suffered the illnesses, Zimmerthe complaint runs out one year after the started, he said. pened to be filed on the day before school time because the statute of limitations on

and they are going to take it to the next them and take the appropriate steps." level and force the defendants to listen to "The parents thought enough was enough all been inadequate," Zimmerman said. fix the problems at Johnson and they have "There have been repeated attempts to

day before school started. no accident that the suit was filed on the Weiner and Young both said that it was

children that are going to Johnson unnecessary concern in the parents of the served the negative purpose to cause sationalistic purposes," Weiner said. "It "I think they filed it [Monday] for sen-

others. \$50,000, he said, even though some stu-673 students of Johnson School, Zimmerdents were affected more severely than man said. Each student would receive satory damages to be divided between the the case, \$33.65 million is in compen-Of the \$83.65 million being sought in

> merman said. punish District 200 for its "intentional actions" made to hide the problem, Zimform of punitive damages intended to The other \$50 million comes in the

moldy ceiling tiles in an attempt to hide before a walk-through inspection by the the problem. Illinois Department of Labor in April 1997, the district replaced all of the Zimmerman said that immediately

damages, he said. suing for roughly half that in punitive 200 was \$94.8 million, so the family is Last year's total revenue for District

mer board members are among those Mary Curley and several current and for-James Travis, Acting Superintendent Former District 200 Superintendent E

ing their kids to get sick." "now that they are aware what was causnamed in the suit, Zimmerman said. shown interest in joining the suit, he said, At least five or 10 other families have

Weiner said. dismiss the complaint because there is "no legal basis for their complaint, District 200 will be filing a motion to

because the school is safe," Weiner said. "No court is going to close the schoo