

# Case of the moldy classroom: District owes sick teacher \$1.8M, judge rules

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Millburn schools declined to comment on the ruling. (File photo)

**MILLBURN** -- A New Jersey music teacher was awarded an approximately \$1.8 million verdict after a judge ruled that her asthma and other chronic lung problems were caused by a mold issue in her classroom.

According to a written decision, Essex County Superior Court Judge Christine Farrington ruled Monday that the Millburn Board of Education owed music teacher Mary Jean Alsina the nearly \$2 million for medical expenses, lost wages, and other damages.

Alsina, a tenured teacher in Millburn, filed suit against the district in 2013 after she said she was exposed to mold while working in a specific room in the middle school. According to the decision, Alsina argued that she had complained about a musty

smell in the room, dripping water from the ceiling, stains and seepage on the walls, and what she believed to be mold growing in the room. Though she argued that the district tested the room and that the school's custodial staff cleaned up the area, Alsina said she did not feel that they adequately addressed the problem, the decision states.



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Alsina was diagnosed with adult onset asthma and other lung conditions, which she and her doctor attributed to the conditions in the classroom, the decision says. She reduced her position at the school from full- to part-time to tend to her medical issues, and as a way to avoid teaching in that classroom, it says.

When Alsina began discussing the mold issue with her colleagues, students, and district parents, she argued that the school's administration retaliated against her, further reducing her schedule to one day a week, and removing most of her duties in the music department.

"My client feels vindicated," Alsina's attorney, Gina Mendola Longarzo, said in a phone interview about the decision. "She's very honest, she didn't exaggerate. ... (The school) tried to discredit her, and punished her, but it was worth all of the suffering."

A spokeswoman for the Millburn school district declined to comment on the suit, noting that it concerns both personnel and legal issues. Longarzo said she anticipates the district will appeal the ruling.

According to Longarzo, Alsina is still employed by the district, giving music lessons one day a week. Though Longarzo said Alsina may choose to resign from the post, she is still hoping to draw attention to what she believes is a mold issue at the school.

"You can't mess with the safety of your students and teachers" Longarzo said. "That's really what this was all about."

The district spokeswoman declined to comment on the mold allegations, but according to a 2012 Patch article, school officials [did address the issue with parents](#) at the time.

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