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## JOINT NEWS RELEASE

**FOR RELEASE Friday, June 9, 2023**

**3 p.m. Eastern**

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### **NEW HANOVER COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION AND PLAINTIFFS IN KELLY CASE REACH \$5.75 MILLION AGREEMENT TO SETTLE LAWSUIT**

Wilmington, NC – The New Hanover County Board of Education and Plaintiffs in the Michael Kelly civil case have mutually announced that they have reached a settlement to resolve claims by 14 men arising from the sexual abuse and exploitation committed by former teacher and convicted felon Michael Kelly.

The \$5.75 million agreement will end the litigation against the Board for allegations arising out of Michael Kelly’s sexual misconduct. Kelly was a chemistry teacher who taught at both Laney High School and Isaac Bear Early College High School in Wilmington. The lawsuit was filed in July 2019 by both the Rhine Law Firm, P.C. and The Lea/Schultz Law Firm, P.C.

“With this settlement, these 14 survivors of Kelly’s abuse will be able to get the treatment and closure that they so desperately need,” says Joel Rhine of the Rhine Law Firm, P.C.

Kelly was arrested on February 6, 2018 by members of the Joint Task Force, involving members of the State Bureau of Investigation, the New Hanover County Sheriff’s Office and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Kelly eventually pled guilty to some 59 felony sex crimes on June 25, 2019.

The agreement will require the schools' insurer to contribute the full amount of the settlement. "This settlement is fully covered with the district's purchase of insurance and will not have an impact on our budget nor on the incredible work that happens in our schools on a daily basis," says Board Chair Pete Wildeboer.

"Today's agreement is an opportunity to move forward from a difficult period in this district's history," adds Martin Ramey, also of the Rhine Law Firm, who negotiated the settlement for the 14 Plaintiffs. "It is now time to look ahead and to work both as a district and as a community to ensure this doesn't happen again in New Hanover County Schools."

In approving this settlement, Board of Education members expressed their sincere hope that the resolution of this case will support the Plaintiffs' path toward healing, and have committed to continued efforts to make the New Hanover County Schools a model for proactive prevention efforts, strong policies and procedures for student safety, and a culture of vigilance.

The agreement also calls for the school to make several important programmatic commitments, including expanded training for students, staff, and administrators on sexual abuse and recognizing and reporting such abuse, and a public report of its efforts to improve the school's policies and practices with regarding to Title IX compliance and sexual abuse prevention. "The Board has been active over the last three years to improve policies, expand our Title IX department, provide student and staff training, and build out our reporting tools and procedures," said Mr. Wildeboer. "These additional commitments reflect our recognition that there is more work to do."

"These men deserve our praise and gratitude. Because of their courage, their endurance, and their commitment, this settlement was possible," says Mary Charles Amerson with the Lea/Schultz Law Firm. "This settlement sends a very clear message that prevention of sexual abuse in schools must be at the forefront of every school system's efforts."

"Nothing that stays hidden ever heals," added Jim Lea, also of the Lea/Schultz firm, borrowing a quote that surfaced early in the case in a video prepared by Plaintiffs' counsel. "The impact of sexual abuse is life-altering. We hope this settlement will begin to bring much needed peace and healing to these men and their families."

The Board and Plaintiffs are finalizing the formal written agreement, and the lawsuit will be dismissed upon execution of the final document.

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