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"We pass these predators from school district to school district until someone with backbone presses charges."

— CHARLES J. HOBSON, professor of management at Indiana University Northwest



Michael Ritchie lives across the street from Pierre Moran Middle School in Elkhart. This photo was taken Aug. 2, 2012.



Michael Ritchie lives at this home in Elkhart. This photo was taken Aug. 2, 2012.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

Trust

Two women told The Times and police, and said in their lawsuit, their loved ones with developmental disabilities fell victim to Ritchie's machinations.

A Times investigation, interviews and official records revealed a pattern of allegations that Ritchie developed relationships with boys from dysfunctional homes, who had developmental or learning disabilities and who reportedly soaked up Ritchie's attention and gifts.

Ritchie, who recently answered the door of his Elkhart, Ind., home wearing an In-Pact T-shirt, declined to comment for The Times' article. He lives directly across the street from a middle school.

"I'm really sorry to hear that the story is going to come out over here," Ritchie said. He paused. "I really have nothing to say."

A HISTORY OF ALLEGATIONS

Ritchie was first the target of a police investigation in 1988, Indiana State Police records show.

At the time, he was a fourth-grade teacher at Lake Village Elementary School in Newton County. He also coached football and boys' basketball.

A concerned father contacted authorities after his son claimed Ritchie, who was the boy's teacher, repeatedly rubbed the boy's "private parts" through his pants throughout the school year, Indiana State Police records state.

"I didn't count the times," the boy told police.

The boy, who had been diagnosed with a learning disability, said he didn't want to get Ritchie in trouble because he liked the extra help Ritchie was giving him with his homework, police reports state.

Several students told police they saw the boy and another male student in the class sitting in Ritchie's lap "being weird," the police reports allege.

And former students told police they remember Ritchie having male students sit on his lap. One girl said she saw Ritchie put his hand inside the pants of two or three male students while they watched film strips, according to police reports.

Ritchie denied having inappropriate contact with the boy, whose father contacted authorities. It is not clear whether police asked Ritchie about the allegations made by his former students.

Ritchie told police he moved the boy's desk next to his own at the front of the class because the boy kept interrupting him with questions, according to the reports.

He said the boy sat on Ritchie's knee while Ritchie helped him with assignments. Ritchie told police the boy liked to pretend he was falling backward so Ritchie would catch him.

"I do not believe that I touched his private area, but if it was, it was for a second only. And it was an accident," Ritchie told police.

Ritchie said he was hurt by the boy's accusations. He told authorities he had never before allowed a student to sit on his lap — a statement contradicted by accounts from former students.

In November 1988, Dan Blacketter, then-superintendent of the North Newton School Corp., suspended Ritchie with pay pending the outcome of a hearing in that matter.

Through a spokesperson, current Assistant Superintendent Steven Sharp told The Times recently that Ritchie was given an ultimatum: Resign or be fired.

Ritchie resigned, school officials said.

"PASSING THE TRASH"

Charles J. Hobson, who is a professor of management at Indiana University Northwest, said the school district's willingness to let Ritchie resign is part of a widespread practice known as "passing the trash."

Superintendents or union representatives throughout the country will allow an alleged perpetrator to resign voluntarily, Hobson said. In exchange, the school officials agree not to report the alleged crime to police and won't put anything negative in the employee's disciplinary file, he said.

This practice enables someone accused of wrongdoing to secure a job in another school, Hobson said.

We pass these predators from school district to school district until someone

Tips for parents to protect their children

- Educate your child
- Never let your child be alone with school employees
- Understand and be aware of the grooming process
- Never let your child be touched by school employees
- Be aware of chaperones on field trips
- Effectively communicate with your child on a daily basis
- Make frequent visits to your child's school and classroom
- Seek advice from the U.S. Department of Education
- Get other parents involved; educate them on this subject matter
- Lobby your school board
- If necessary, call police and child protective services
- Get needed treatment for your child
- Secure legal counsel

SOURCE: INDIANA UNIVERSITY NORTHWEST. FOR MORE TIPS, VISIT WWW.IUINW.COM/CHILDPROTECTION

"I do not believe that I touched his private area, but if it was, it was for a second only. And it was an accident."

— MICHAEL RITCHIE told investigators, according to Indiana State Police reports

with backbone presses charges," Hobson said.

The Newton County prosecutor's office declined to file criminal charges against Ritchie for his alleged conduct in Lake Village Elementary School.

The prosecutor's reason for doing so is unclear. The prosecutor's office's records do not go back that far, and the people who were in leadership positions in the office at that time are dead.

Retired Indiana State Police Sgt. Bill Krueger, who investigated the allegations against Ritchie in Newton County, said his recollection is prosecutors thought the situation could be handled by the school two or three male students while they watched film strips, according to police reports.

Ritchie later investigated two other allegations of molestation against Ritchie — one in 1991 and another relating to an alleged incident that occurred during the summer of 1984 but was not reported until later, Indiana State Police records show. Neither of those investigations resulted in criminal charges.

But Ritchie's interactions with children continued.

"PROBLEMS WITH CHILDREN"

After leaving North Newton School Corp., Ritchie worked as a substitute teacher in Porter Township Schools and North Judson-San Pierre School Corp., according to the application for employment he filed with In-Pact.

Ritchie said he worked extensively with three students who had developmental disabilities at Boone Grove High School, which is part of Porter Township Schools, from October 1991. According to payroll ledgers, he worked four days.

The district has no record of Ritchie's having any disciplinary issues during his employment, Zembla said.

In June 1991, Ritchie applied for a position at In-Pact, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing services to people with autism and other developmental disabilities. Ritchie did not put North Newton School Corp. — from which he was reportedly forced to resign — on his list of current or former employers.

In the application, In-Pact asked Ritchie whether an employer ever failed to renew his contract or asked him to resign. He checked the "no" option, according to employment records provided to The Times by attorney Robert Hawk Jr., who represented families in the civil lawsuit filed against In-Pact and Ritchie.

About a month later, In-Pact officials learned Ritchie had indeed resigned from

a previous employer, employment records show.

"Mr. Ritchie resigned due to problems with children in the classroom, and I am not at liberty to comment on them," someone wrote on an In-Pact reference questionnaire dated July 3, 1991. It is not clear which district it pertains to or who signed the form.

The document shows In-Pact knew as early as July 1991 there were questions about Ritchie's conduct with children — yet the nonprofit hired him anyway, agency records provided to The Times show.

In-Pact Executive Director Herbert Gruke declined requests to interview him for this article.

MORE QUESTIONS OVER CONDUCT

Ritchie continued to work in the public school system while employed by In-Pact, court and school records show.

In 1999, Ritchie started as a permanent substitute teacher at Grimmer Middle School in Schererville, which is part of Lake Central School Corp. He worked for the school district in various capacities — including as an opportunity classroom teacher, permanent substitute, assistant chess club sponsor, Science Olympiad sponsor and classroom teacher under temporary contract — through June 2004, school records show.

Ritchie told police in a later interview he left Lake Central at the end of the school year after he was accused of inappropriately touching a child, court records state.

Rocky Kilian, a former assistant superintendent at Lake Central School Corp., said he has "no memory" of Ritchie or of allegations of misconduct in that time period. Kilian said he would remember someone like that, because police would have been contacted and lawyers would have been involved.

Dyer, St. John and Schererville police departments told The Times they have no record of allegations of misconduct by Ritchie in Lake Central schools. The school corporation also has no record of any disciplinary action taken against Ritchie.

Ritchie resigned June 4, 2004, and was thanked for his service to the district, school records show.

"Thank you very much for all that you have done to make the Lake Central School Corp. a better place for students to learn," Kilian said in a letter to Ritchie. "We wish you well in your future endeavors."

Ritchie also remains under investigation by Gary Community School Corp. for undisclosed conduct, a spokeswoman for that district said.

Gary schools spokeswoman Charmella Greer said last month the district won't release any information to The Times because the situation remains under review. She declined to release the dates of Ritchie's employment.

Though Ritchie's positions in various school districts ended, his work with In-Pact continued.

THE ETHICS OF TOUCH

At first, Hobart mother Michele Bates thought Ritchie was a godsend.

She said she placed her then-8-year-old son at In-Pact's Crown Point facility in 2004 after he started attacking her. The boy had been diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder, moderate mental retardation, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and grand mal seizures, she said.

Bates said her son quickly grew attached to Ritchie, who took her son shopping and to soccer and swimming classes.

Bates said she appreciated the good job Ritchie seemed to be doing.

"He fooled me," she says now. "I think he fooled a lot of people."

Unbeknownst to Bates, Ritchie was reprimanded less than a month after her son's arrival for not establishing boundaries in their relationship, according to In-Pact records.

"He fooled me."

I think he fooled a lot of people."

— HOBART MOTHER MICHELLE BATES

"You allowed him to lay his head in your lap, caress his back, etc., and this was reciprocated back," In-Pact Supervisor Dana Rock told Ritchie in a disciplinary action notice dated Oct. 27, 2004. "At this point you should have discouraged (his) behavior and redirected him. The following behaviors should be discouraged: sitting too close to staff — on their lap — laying on, caressing or letting (him) put his hand in your pockets."

The supervisor told Ritchie to review the organization's "Ethics of Touch" policy. Ritchie denied doing anything wrong and wrote a rebuttal.

About a year later, he was reprimanded again when a supervisor found Ritchie lying on a beanbag chair with Bates' son on top of him eating a sucker, In-Pact records show. The two were with another boy in the room with lights off and the door closed, according to the disciplinary action notice dated Dec. 20, 2005.

Ritchie again denied any wrongdoing, according to the notice.

"(Bates' son) had rolled off the bed intentionally," Ritchie wrote in his rebuttal. "I checked to see if he was OK as he had a sucker in his mouth. I then helped him up. I believe there was nothing inappropriate about my actions."

An In-Pact supervisor said if the behaviors Ritchie displayed were seen again with any consumer, he would be suspended without pay and face disciplinary action up to termination, according to the notification of employee disciplinary action.

Ritchie was transferred to a different In-Pact facility in 2006, less than a month after that second reprimand, according to agency records.

CAUSES FOR CONCERN

Bates said Ritchie approached her during a party at the group home and told her he was leaving because the staff didn't like him. He was working in her son. He asked for Bates' number to keep in touch with her son, but she didn't give it.

About three years later, Bates said she learned her son had been acting out sexually in the Crown Point facility.

He undressed another boy at May 29, 2009, in the backyard of the group home, climbed on him and started mimicking sex on the other boy, Bates said during a civil lawsuit she filed against In-Pact and Ritchie and later repeated to The Times. The staff told her they were dealing with another child at the time, she said.

Bates said In-Pact employees accused her of either watching pornography or having sex in front of her son. The psychiatrist told Bates her son had to have seen that sexual behavior somewhere, she said.

Bates, who brought her son home every other weekend and for extended periods around most holidays, said she was infuriated by her accusations. She said the group home also told her his actions could have been spurred by puberty.

On July 27, 2009, an In-Pact employee found Bates' son with his pants down on top of another boy in that boy's room, she said. When Bates' son saw the employee, he ran out of the room, Bates said.

At that point, Bates said she had enough. She told In-Pact to pack up his belongings and picked him up from school. She said her son burst into tears when he saw her.

"John, he hurt me, Mom. He hurt me," Bates remembers her son crying. Bates' son is largely nonverbal and calls all men "John" and all women "ma" or "she."

That night, Bates said she awoke to the sound of her dog barking and nudging her hand. Her son's clothes were on the stairs and outside. She found him mimicking sex on the ground between her garage and neighbor's house.

Bates contacted the Indiana Department of Child Services and took her son to the doctor to see if he had been molested. She said the doctor told her he couldn't see anything but that there were signs Bates' son had been fondled based on his reaction to the exam.

While Bates fought for answers regarding her son's behavior, more accusations of misconduct surfaced against Ritchie.

COMING MONDAY, Part 2: Michael Ritchie faces criminal charges but has never been convicted. Alleged victims' family members beg for justice.