

# Parent of special education student 'caged' in class sues Fresno Unified

By Hannah Furfaro



Enclosure used by Viking Elementary teacher Teresa MonPere.

SUBMITTED PHOTO BY LEDELLDRA BROOKS

The mother of a Fresno elementary student who was allegedly locked in a cage-like enclosure last school year has filed a federal lawsuit against Fresno Unified School District.

The [lawsuit filed on May 1](#) by Ledelldra Brooks alleges her special needs daughter, who has a seizure disorder and intellectual disabilities, was regularly locked inside a makeshift structure made of bookcases and a toddler gate by her Viking Elementary teacher. The suit names Fresno Unified, the girl's teacher, the principal and a former administrator at the school. It follows [two claims Brooks submitted](#) to the district's school board in November. The board [rejected both claims](#), which were prerequisites to filing the suit.

District spokeswoman Amy Idsvoog said Wednesday that the district has not received the lawsuit and could not comment.

According to the suit, Brooks discovered the alleged abuse in late May 2014 when she made an unannounced visit to the east-central school and found her daughter in the cage, wearing a soiled diaper.

Brooks removed her daughter from class and promptly called the principal and police, who showed up that day, dismantled the enclosure and interviewed the girl's teachers. The Viking teacher, Teresa MonPere, was immediately put on administrative leave, emails from administrators and special education employees show. MonPere did not immediately return phone messages left by The Bee on Wednesday. Viking principal Christie Yang, who was named in the suit, did not return phone messages left by The Bee.

Former principal Ron Bohigian was also named in the suit. On Wednesday, he said it can be difficult for teachers to figure out a plan “on relatively rare occasions when a child with very special needs gets really out of control and ends up hurting other kids and even staff people.

“You have a choice of either putting a child in a time-out area where he or she is safe, or the teacher or the aide is required to physically restrain the child, which can really be a violent experience,” he said. “That’s not much of a better alternative.”

He spoke highly of MonPere, calling her one of the most “saintly” teachers he ever worked with while at Viking.

Teachers at the school who were interviewed by police at the time said the special needs children were put in the gated area only when they were out of control or posed a risk to themselves and classmates.

In November, school district officials said they conducted a thorough investigation, including a sweep of almost all the district schools, in search of similar enclosures. The results of that investigation were not made public.

Brooks said on Wednesday that her daughter now attends school at Wishon Elementary and is undergoing psychological counseling and other services. She suffers from fear and anxiety, Brooks said, has low self-esteem and other emotional challenges.

Brooks’ attorney Peter Alfert said the suit seeks an unspecified amount in damages, plus attorney fees. Brooks said she’s also looking to hold the teacher and administrators at Viking accountable and shed light on what happened so it’s “not swept under the rug.”

Attorney Todd Boley, who is working with Alfert on the case, said Fresno Unified officials have 20 days to respond to the suit once they receive it.

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