

Ex-Priest Who Abused Child Allowed Access to Chicago Schools

June 22, 2018/CBS Chicago

<https://www.cbsnews.com/chicago/news/ex-priest-who-abused-child-allowed-access-to-cps/>

CHICAGO (AP) — Chicago Public Schools correspondence provided to The Associated Press shows that the nation's third largest school district gave a former Roman Catholic priest access to its schools for months, despite knowing he was forced to leave the priesthood for sexually abusing a boy of six when he was around 15.

Only after the victim and the AP asked why the district let former cleric Bruce Wellems enter schools as part of alternative-schooling programs he oversees, did the nation's third-largest school district recently ban him.

Criticism that the district hasn't done enough to protect 370,000 students at nearly 650 schools from sexual

misconduct intensified after a June 8 article in the Chicago Tribune.

The paper reported CPS didn't adequately vet its own employees and cited scores of alleged cases of sexual abuse by staffers. Illinois lawmakers held hearings on the issue this week.

Wellems, 61, isn't on the district's staff.

But he has worked with CPS as executive director of the a nonprofit Peace and Education Coalition, which runs CPS-sanctioned alternative schools at CPS properties for at-risk kids, including the Peace & Education Coalition High School in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood.

The AP reported last year that Wellems has remained executive director even after leaving the priesthood over the abuse.

CPS spokeswoman Emily Bolton said in a statement to the AP Thursday that, in addition to the new ban on Wellems, the district was now doing a full review "to determine if an ongoing relationship" with the

coalition "remains appropriate."

Wellems' victim, Eric Johnson, now 53, contacted CPS when he saw photos online of Wellems at district schools.

He wrote a March 22 letter to district CEO Janice Jackson, describing how he was sexually abused by Wellems more than a dozen times over a year starting in 1973 when they were neighbors in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Johnson was in the 2nd grade and Wellems in high school. "I never will forget the horror," Johnson wrote.

He said his concern was for the schoolchildren: "I don't want anyone else to go through what I have gone through." Johnson provided all his correspondence with CPS to the AP.

Wellems admitted to the AP in emails and in a 2014 interview that he had inappropriately touched Johnson and described it as "abuse."

He said it happened twice. And he said he never again

abused a child.

Wellems has not returned multiple messages seeking comment over several days.

Sister Angela Kolacinski, who answered at a phone number for the coalition, declined to speak about Wellems' role with the coalition. "We aren't interested in talking about those things," she said.

An April 12 response to Johnson's letter from CPS deputy general counsel James Ciesil, who said he was responding on Jackson's behalf, did not heed Johnson's call at the time for a full ban on Wellems, saying only that CPS would "restrict and closely monitor" his contact with CPS students.

Johnson was first informed in a letter he received early this month that CPS had reconsidered.

The AP first sought comment from CPS on May 2 and repeated its request over several weeks, but did not receive any comment.

Bolton, the CPS spokeswoman, said in her Thursday statement that the April 12 letter to Johnson "was improperly sent on behalf of (Jackson)" and that

Jackson "did not review or authorize the policy represented in the letter."

Wellems was a popular, high-profile priest when he served in the 1990s and 2000s at Holy Cross Immaculate Heart of Mary in the poor, heavily Latino Back of the Yards, often praised for programs to help teenagers stay out of street gangs.

He retains some support, including through a website, www.ISupportBruceWellems.com.

Backers say he shouldn't be ostracized for something that happened so long ago.

Wellems belonged to the Claretians Roman Catholic order and resigned from the priesthood early last year.

It was one of Johnson's conditions to settle a lawsuit against the order for \$25,000.

A letter on the ban was hand-delivered to Wellems, said Bolton. And all principals were notified "that they must not permit Wellems on school property."