

Teacher fired after admitting molestation

By Steven Gosset

Staff Writer

A teacher at a Catholic boys' school in Montvale, N.J., which is attended by many Rockland students, has been dismissed after admitting he molested a student, officials said yesterday.

Brother John Dagwell, 44, was fired in July after admitting his guilt. However, the incident was first revealed Tuesday by Bergen County prosecutors.

Dagwell taught physics and calculus for the past 20 years at St. Joseph Regional High School.

He pleaded guilty last month to endangering the welfare of a child. Under the plea agreement, he will receive psychiatric treatment rather than a prison term when he is formally sentenced Sept. 23, by Superior Court Judge Sybil Moses.

"We're very saddened by what happened. We're shocked," said the school's principal, Brother Peter Russell, who called Dagwell an "outstanding" instructor who was popular with his students.

After Dagwell admitted in July the allegations presented against him were true, his teaching credentials were revoked by the Xavieran Brothers, which runs the school, and he severed all ties with St. Joseph.

'We're very saddened
by what happened.
We're shocked.'

— **Brother Peter Russell,**
Principal of St. Joseph's
Regional High School

Dagwell was reassigned to the treasurer's office at the regional Xavieran headquarters in Milton, Mass. He is currently undergoing inpatient psychiatric counseling, said his attorney, Michael J. Beatrice. "It's a rather aggressive psychotherapy program," Beatrice said.

Bergen County Assistant Prosecutor Fred Schwanwede said his office interviewed about a dozen present and former students from the school about incidents dating back to 1974.

However, Beatrice and Russell believe more than 100 students were actually contacted by authorities.

"A lot of things that were talked about was inappropriate (behavior) but a lot of it was not indictable," Schwanwede said. "A lot

of what occurred could be described as locker-room stuff."

The one count Dagwell pleaded guilty to involved his touching a student's genitals through the student's clothing in June 1986, Schwanwede said.

Dagwell pleaded guilty to an accusation drafted by prosecutors. It meant Dagwell waived his constitutional right to have his case considered by a grand jury and allowed him to avoid an indictment.

"In cases where a person admits to what they've done, we don't usually present it to a grand jury," Schwanwede said.

However, an accusation carries the same weight as an indictment when a judge ponders a sentence, Schwanwede said.

Students and their families were sent a letter explaining that Dagwell had left the school, but it did not say why. About 35 percent of the 700 students who attend St. Joseph live in Rockland. The rest live in northern New Jersey.

As the students return to school this week, they are being told what happened in class assemblies, Russell said.

Schwanwede was hopeful the incident would not reflect badly on St. Joseph, whose administrators he said cooperated fully in the investigation and were unaware of the problems. "We had no clue," Russell said.