

LOCAL

Merced-area coach admits sexually harassing teacher, but denies claims in new lawsuit

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UPDATED JULY 24, 2019 4:44 PM



Golden Valley High School Social Studies and Women's Studies teacher Annie Delgado, speaks during a Merced Union High School District meeting at Golden Valley High School in Merced, Calif., on Wednesday, May 9, 2018. Delgado alleged the school district mishandled her report after she experienced sexual harassment and battery by a colleague in 2017. Andrew Kuhn akuhn@mercedsun-star.com

Keith Hunter, a celebrated varsity basketball coach at Merced's Golden Valley High, recently admitted sexually harassing high school teacher Annie Delgado. However, Hunter also refuted new allegations Delgado revealed in a lawsuit filed earlier this year.

Hunter slapped Delgado's buttocks on March 25, 2017, during a Merced High School Boosters' Hall of Fame event and remarked to her about her breasts and legs, according to a letter from the district reprimanding the coach.

Hunter, in a recent interview with the Sun-Star, acknowledged touching Delgado's buttocks and said he apologizes and regrets his conduct that day.

"I've never downplayed my behavior," Hunter said. "I've tried to own up to it."

But he pushed back on several other allegations in the lawsuit Delgado filed May 14 in Merced County Superior Court.



Golden Valley head coach Keith Hunter looks down his bench during a game against El Capitan at Golden Valley High School in Merced, Calif., on Wednesday, Jan. 23, 2019. Andrew Kuhn akuhn@mercedsun-star.com

Hunter acknowledged offering to let Delgado's husband sexually harass his wife as some form of restitution as described in court records, but said he was joking.

In her lawsuit, Delgado, 47, also says the district is responsible for the sexual harassment and failed to prevent discrimination, harassment and retaliation, among other claims.

The lawsuit doesn't say exactly how much Delgado is seeking in damages. However, a separate claim filed against Merced County put Delgado's medical expenses, attorneys' fees, and emotional distress at \$550,000. The Merced County Board of Supervisors rejected the claim for damages.

Delgado's explosive claims put workplace sexual harassment in the spotlight at the Merced Union High School District. During her appearance on May 9, 2018, Delgado refused to identify the offending coworker. She said she wanted to focus attention on administrators who she said didn't take workplace sexual harassment seriously. She said the district's discipline of the harassing coworker amounted to a slap on the wrist.

Other teachers and students followed Delgado's lead and discussed their own experiences with sexual misconduct. Several others also said they felt administrators swept such issues under the rug.

Those issues reemerged five months later when a [Sun-Star investigation](#) identified Hunter as the man who sexually harassed Delgado.

NEW ALLEGATIONS

In her lawsuit, Delgado also makes new sexual harassment claims against Hunter - the claims the veteran basketball coach denies.

Delgado claims she passed along to the district second-hand information that Hunter may have exposed himself during a golf tournament and, she said, the district failed to investigate.

Hunter told the Sun-Star that never happened and described the allegations as “totally inaccurate.” Delgado claims the school district failed to investigate the claim.

Claire Cochran, an attorney for Delgado, said the district should have investigated the claims, even though it was second-hand hearsay.

Delgado’s lawsuit also details a confrontation between her husband and Hunter a week after the Hall of Fame dinner in 2017. Court records describe Hunter as “contrite” over his behavior and claims he invited Delgado’s husband to punch him.

Hunter also invited Delgado’s husband to sexually harass his wife. Hunter told the Sun-Star he thought Delgado’s husband knew he was kidding.

In his interview with the Sun-Star, Hunter acknowledged wrongdoing and regretted his actions.

Still, Hunter said he felt the timing of Delgado’s initial complaint - eight months after the 2017 incident - was suspicious. Hunter said the complaint emerged after he announced his campaign to be president of the teachers union.

Hunter said he worked “well” with Delgado on the union contract-negotiating team for eight months following the hall of fame incident and believed the issue was behind them.

That further confirms Delgado’s professionalism, said Jackie Len, another attorney for Delgado.

“Coach Hunter’s defense only highlights the fact that Annie Delgado continued to do her job despite having been sexually harassed by him,” Len said. “It was excruciating. But it was mandatory because he is such a powerful figure in the district.”

Still, Hunter also said he felt targeted after Delgado went public with the sexual harassment allegations. He said many staff members knew he was the man at the center of the sexual harassment complaint, even though his name didn't become public until months later in a [Sun-Star report](#).

SCHOOL DISTRICT'S RESPONSE

School district officials declined to comment on the lawsuit.

But in a formal response to the lawsuit filed in court, district officials denied any wrongdoing or mismanagement.

The district has revised its sexual harassment, bullying and employee discipline policies since Delgado went public.

"In light of feedback the district received during the May 2018 board meeting, district administration and the board chose to [create and adopt a comprehensive sexual harassment and bullying action plan](#)," school district spokesperson Sam Yniguez said.

The next hearing in the lawsuit is scheduled for Oct. 21 in Merced County Superior Court.

This story has been corrected to report Hunter acknowledging he invited Delgado's husband to sexually harass his wife. He said the remark was a joke.