ESSEX

Jury awards 2 former Newark school employees $1.3M in reverse discrimination case

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A jury awarded a former math department chairperson at Barringer High School more than $650,000 in damages in a reverse discrimination case dating back to 2013.Michael Sol Warren I NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

By Steve Strunsky | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

In a decade-old reverse discrimination case, an Essex County jury awarded $1.3 million in compensatory and punitive damages to two white veteran educators who charged they were denied vice principal jobs at Newark high schools because of their race and age. Instead, the jobs went to younger people of color who, the suit charged, were less experienced and less qualified.

The suit was filed jointly in 2015 by Anna D'Antonio, 69, a former athletic director at Weequahic High School, and Donna Stridacchio, 65, who was chair of the math department at Barringer High School.

The suit, filed in state Superior Court in Newark, charged that D'Antonio and Stridacchio applied for vice principal jobs at their respective schools under a 2013 leadership reorganization throughout the district, which is predominantly Latino and Black.

Stridacchio, of Parsippany, retired in 2014 after suffering a nervous breakdown following her transfer to McKinley High School and a demotion to lunch aide, said her lawyer, Kevin Barber.

D'Antonio, who lived in Brick at the time, retired in 2017 after being moved back to a teaching position, said Barber, adding that his client relocated to Florida after no longer being able to afford the mortgage on her house due to a pay cut.

The suit named the Newark Public Schools district plus an unidentified man and woman referred to as John and Jane Does. It charged that the district and employees "engaged in a continuing pattern and practice of disparate treatment and discrimination against older and or Caucasian employees, including but not limited to denying them promotions and subjecting them to demotions or terminations," in violation of the New Jersey Law Against Discrimination.

Barber said an eight-person jury of three Black women, one Black man, two white women, one Latina woman, and one white man arrived at a verdict on Wednesday after three hours of deliberations following a 3-week trial.

The jury awarded D'Antonio $200,000 for pain and suffering and $417,930 in economic damages for lost income; $608,574 to Stridacchio for lost income; and $50,000 in punitive damages to each woman for what

Barber said was their finding that both principals lied in statements before the trial and then admitted those misstatements in their testimony. He said the verdict made clear that the jurors focused simply and rightly on whether his clients had been the victims of discrimination, regardless of the minority-majority status of the district, the surrounding community, or the jury itself.

"I was told by every lawyer I was crazy going into Newark with a reverse discrimination case," said Barber, a partner at Niedweske Barber LLC in Morristown. "Nobody was going to buy it, blah, blah blah.

"But it was a jury that reflected the beautiful mosaic of Essex County," added Barber, a litigator for over 30 years. "It was the most attentive, insightful jury I've ever tried a case in front of. They didn't care that it was white against minorities. They just protected the rule of law."

A district spokesperson, Nancy Deering, noted that the alleged conduct and the filing of the suit predate the school system's return to local control in 2018 following a 22-year state takeover. But Deering nonetheless rejected the verdict and said district officials were weighing an appeal.

"We are extremely disappointed with the verdict in this lawsuit, which was filed eight years ago during state operation of the school district," Deering said in a statement. "We continue to deny that the district discriminated against anyone, and we are reviewing all options regarding an appeal."

Under the 2013 reorganization, Barber said the Barringer and Weequahic principals were tasked with hiring a half-dozen vice principals as part of their school leadership team. Despite D'Antonio's work in the district for 33 years, including seven as the Weequahic athletic director, she was passed over in favor of younger people of color with less experience and fewer qualifications. Stridacchio, who had spent 30 years with the district as a teacher and supervisor, was subject to the same discrimination at Barringer High School, Barber said.

Neither of the principals at the time remain in those positions, Barber said, adding that one is no longer employed by the district.

In a written response, the lawyer who handled the case for the district, Bryant Lawrence Horsely Jr., summarily

denied many of the individual assertions in the complaint and rejected others as "vague." For others, the response stated that the district "neither admits nor denies the conclusory allegations as set forth."

At one point, the response stated, "Defendant has an effective and well-publicized policy against discrimination."



Weequahic High SchoolAnde Richards INJ Advance Media for NJ.com

PREPARED BY THE COURT

ANNA K. D'ANTONIO and DONNA STRIDACCHIO Plaintiff, v. NEWARK PUBLIC SCHOOLS Defendant.	SUPERIOR COURT OF NEW JERSEY LAW DIVISION - ESSEX COUNTY DOCKET NO. ESX-L-6132-15 *Civil Action* **VERDICT SHEET**

Plaintiff Anna K. D'Antonio

1. Has Plaintiff Anna K. D'Antonio proved by a preponderance of the evidence that she applied for and interviewed and was better qualified than the candidates selected for the Weequahic High School vice principal positions?

✓ **Yes** ___ **No** ___ **Vote**
6 - 0

If "YES" continue to Question 2.

If "NO" then you must STOP your deliberations as to Plaintiff D'Antonio, return a verdict for Defendant Newark Public Schools against Plaintiff D'Antonio and then proceed to Question 6.

2. Has Plaintiff Anna K. D'Antonio proved by a preponderance of the evidence that she was not selected for one of the Weequahic High School vice principal positions because of her age and/or race?

✓ **Yes** ___ **No** ___ **Vote**

If "YES" continue to Question 3.

6 - 0

9.15

If "NO" then you must STOP your deliberations as to Plaintiff D'Antonio, return a verdict for Defendant Newark Public Schools against Plaintiff D'Antonio and then proceed to Question 6.

3. Is Plaintiff Anna K. D'Antonio entitled to an award of compensatory damages to fairly and reasonably compensate her for her past and present emotional damages as a result of age and/or race discrimination by Defendant Newark Public Schools? If so, in what amount?

___ Yes **✓ No** **___ Vote**

$_____ 6-0

4. Is Plaintiff Anna K. D'Antonio entitled to an award of compensatory damages to fairly and reasonably compensate her for her pain, suffering, and loss of enjoyment of life as a result of age and/or race discrimination by Defendant Newark Public Schools? If so, in what amount?

✓ Yes **___ No** **___ Vote**

$ 200,000 6-0

5. Is Plaintiff Anna K. D'Antonio entitled to an award of compensatory damages to fairly and reasonably compensate her for her economic damages as a result of age and/or race discrimination by Defendant Newark Public Schools? If so, in what amount?

✓ Yes **___ No** **___ Vote**

$ 417,930.00 6-0

Plaintiff Donna Stridacchio

6. Has Plaintiff Donna Stridacchio proved by a preponderance of the evidence that she applied for and interviewed and was better qualified than the candidates selected for the Barringer High School vice principal positions?

✓ **Yes** ___ **No** ___ **Vote** 6-0

If "YES" continue to Question 7.

If "NO" proceed to Question 8.

7. Has Plaintiff Donna Stridacchio proved by a preponderance of the evidence that she was not selected for the Barringer High School vice principal positions because of her age and/or race?

✓ **Yes** ___ **No** ___ **Vote** 6-0

If "YES" continue to Question 10.

If "NO" proceed to Question 8.

8. Has Plaintiff Donna Stridacchio proved by a preponderance of the evidence that she applied for and interviewed and was better qualified than the candidate selected for the University High School VP position?

___ **Yes** ___ **No** ___ **Vote**

If "YES" continue to Question 9.

If you answered "NO" to both Question 6 and Question 8, then you must STOP your deliberations and return a verdict for Newark Public School against Plaintiff Donna Stridacchio.

9. Has Plaintiff Donna Stridacchio proved by a preponderance of the evidence that she was not selected for the University High School vice principal position because of her age?

___ Yes **___ No** **___ Vote**

If "YES" continue to Question 10.

If you answered "NO" to Question 7 and 9, then you must STOP your deliberations and return a verdict for Newark Public School against Plaintiff Donna Stridacchio.

10. Is Plaintiff Donna Stridacchio entitled to an award of compensatory damages to fairly and reasonably compensate her for her past, present, and future emotional damages as a result of discrimination by Defendant Newark Public Schools? If so, in what amount?

✓ Yes **___ No** **___ Vote**

$_____ 6-0

11. Is Plaintiff Donna Stridacchio entitled to an award of compensatory damages to fairly and reasonably compensate her for her pain, suffering, and loss of enjoyment of life as a result of discrimination by Defendant Newark Public Schools? If so, in what amount?

___ Yes **✓ No** **___ Vote**

$_____ 6-0

12. Is Plaintiff Donna Stridacchio entitled to an award of compensatory damages to fairly and reasonably compensate her for her economic damages as a result of discrimination by Defendant Newark Public Schools? If so, in what amount?

✓ Yes **___ No** **___ Vote**

$ 608,574 6-0

FOREPERSON Brittany Mundy DATE 3-1-23

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ANNA K. D'ANTONIO and DONNA STRIDACCHIO Plaintiff, v. NEWARK PUBLIC SCHOOLS Defendant.	SUPERIOR COURT OF NEW JERSEY LAW DIVISION - ESSEX COUNTY DOCKET NO. ESX-L-6132-15 *Civil Action* **PUNITIVE DAMAGES VERDICT SHEET**

1. Should plaintiffs be awarded punitive damages in this case?
If so, in what amount?

✓ **Yes** ___ **No** 9-0

$ 100,000.00

FOREPERSON [illegible] DATE 3-1-23

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