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FISHERS, Ind. — A suburban Indianapolis school district being sued by the family of a bullied student who committed suicide sent a letter to parents Wednesday, saying school officials took several steps to help the teenager and his family before his death.

The federal lawsuit alleges that officials at Fishers Junior High School and Hamilton Southeastern High School did nothing to prevent other students from harassing 14-year-old Jamarcus Bell because he was black, perceived to be gay and emotionally troubled.

Instead, the lawsuit alleges, school officials blamed Bell when he retaliated and at one point expelled him from the junior high. He died last year.

Hamilton Southeastern Superintendent Brian Smith said in a statement released Wednesday that teachers and administrators tried to help Bell and his family. Smith didn't offer details, saying the school district would defend itself in court.

"We believe there are factors that are very different from the ones alleged in the lawsuit and portrayed in the media," Smith said.

The wrongful death lawsuit filed last week by Bell's mother alleges that the teenager had his shoes and clothing stolen, metal pieces thrown at him during welding class and was physically assaulted at the schools in Fishers. At one point, the suit claims, officials allegedly told a bully that Bell's parents had complained, leading to retribution.

The lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court in Indianapolis, accuses Hamilton Southeastern school district officials of negligence and depriving Bell of his rights under federal nondiscrimination

laws, and seeks unspecified damages.

Bell was a seventh grader when he first attempted suicide in April 2009, and was found in a school janitor's closet where a noose was hanging from the ceiling, the lawsuit alleged. Despite that incident, and an evaluation that found he suffered from depression and other mental problems, school officials declined a request to place him in special education classes, according to the lawsuit filed Nov. 21 by his mother, Natalie Moore.

Bell committed suicide at his home on Oct. 20, 2010.

"Jamarcus was a child in need of educational services, certain protections," Jason Delk, an attorney for Bell's mother, told The Indianapolis Star (http://indy.st/rtOtVW [1]). "They failed him in that regard. They continued to throw him amongst the wolves, the student population."

His death came at a time when national attention was focused on bullying. The death a month earlier of Billy Lucas, a 15-year-old student at Greensburg High School, made headlines when he hanged himself in a family barn. Classmates said he was bullied relentlessly with anti-gay slurs in school.

And last month, a northwest Indiana couple sued their school district, claiming school officials failed to protect their son from prolonged bullying over his Middle Eastern background that culminated in an attack that left him with a brain injury.

School districts have a responsibility to protect students, and if a district doesn't take adequate steps to stop known abuse, it may be liable, said Fran Watson, a law professor at Indiana University School of Law-Indianapolis.

"When you require kids to be at school by law, then your duty is to keep them reasonably safe," Watson said. "'Reasonably' means what you can foresee. And schools are now on notice that you can foresee bullying."
Child advocates, gay rights activists and psychologists are pushing for schools to do more to prevent bullying, and schools are responding by enacting anti-bullying policies and urging vigilance by parents.

Jill Marcellus, spokeswoman for the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, said schools can take concrete steps to prevent bullying of gay students, including establishing harassment policies that include sexual orientation, supporting student gay-straight alliance clubs, and training staff to intervene when they hear slurs.

Hamilton Southeastern administrators have said the district has fought bullying in various ways, including character education programs and recently, a program that allows students and parents to send anonymous tips through text messages about bullying and harassment.

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