

Baker teacher: Arrest 'humiliating, confusing'



Advocate staff photo by BILL FEIG – Baker Middle School teacher Deborah Anderson, 47, left, listens as her attorney, Yigal Bander, right, answers a question during a phone interview. Prosecutors have decided not to pursue charges against Anderson who was arrested and accused of assaulting an eighth-grade student after she yanked him by his shirt last week.

Prosecutors decline to pursue charges against Anderson

by STEVEN WARD

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BAKER – The Baker teacher arrested and [accused of assaulting an eighth-grade student](#) last week said she felt like a load had fallen off her shoulders when she learned Friday that prosecutors decided not to pursue the charges against her.

The teacher, Deborah Anderson, 47, was handcuffed at school on March 13, placed in a patrol car and driven to the Baker Police Department before she was transferred to East Baton Rouge Parish Prison and booked with simple battery.

Anderson, who spent a couple of hours in jail before her release on bond, called the experience of being arrested and booked “humiliating and confusing, especially when you know you’ve done the right thing. It was like a big slap in the face.”

The incident started when a student tried to enter Anderson's classroom with his shirt untucked. The student, who called his mother to the school, complained to police that the teacher had yanked him by his shirt and blocked him from entering her classroom.

Attorney Ken Fabre, who is head of Baker's legal department and acts as Baker City Court's special prosecutor, said Friday, "There's not sufficient evidence that a crime occurred and this office will not prosecute."

He added, "I looked at everything and, under my watch, there was no way I was going to prosecute this schoolteacher."

Anderson said she was relieved by the prosecutor's decision.

"I'm excited and happy," Anderson said from the office of her attorney, Yigal Bander.

Anderson said she holds Baker Police Chief Mike Knaps responsible for her arrest.

"Knaps. That's a name I won't forget," Anderson said.

Anderson, a teacher for 16 years, started teaching at Baker Middle School in February. Before that, she worked in the East Baton Rouge Parish school system.

When contacted Friday about the prosecutor's decision, Knaps released a brief, written statement.

"With the prosecutor having the opportunity to view all the evidence from both sides I support his decision," Knaps wrote.

Knaps has been criticized by Baker Schools Superintendent Ulysses Joseph, School Board President Dana Carpenter and Steve Monaghan, president of the Louisiana Federation of Teachers union, and others for acting too aggressively in having Anderson arrested and hauled off to jail.

Knaps has defended the Police Department's decision to book Anderson by citing Police Department protocol. Knaps has said the department protocol is to book an adult on battery charges when the victim is a juvenile.

Knaps has said Anderson refused to give police a statement that would have provided her side of the story. However, Anderson disputes that account. She said she talked to police as they were investigating the incident and told them her story "three or four times."

Anderson also has said she did not batter the student. Anderson and Bander have said she put out her arm to stop the student from entering her class because his shirt was untucked and asked him to tuck it into his pants, in accordance with school policy.

Bander and Anderson have said the student called her a "bitch," cursed at her and refused to tuck in his shirt.

The student's mother, Charity Schofield, said last week that she was called by one of the school's assistant principals and was informed her son was in the school office upset because a teacher "snatched" him.

Schofield later called police to investigate.

Joseph, who called Anderson to apologize Monday night and invited her back to work on Tuesday, said he was pleased to hear that Baker prosecutors declined to prosecute Anderson.

"All the young lady was trying to do was her job. She was trying to enforce the rules," Joseph said.

Monaghan said Friday that he was not surprised by the prosecutor's decision.

"The good that has come from all of this is that it looks as if the Police Department and the school system will meet to work out how to handle this kind of situation in the future," Monaghan said.

Carnell Washington, president of the East Baton Rouge Federation of Teachers Union, said he applauds the decision by prosecutors.

"What the teacher did was reasonable. I think the parent was the only one here who was unreasonable. The police were probably under pressure," Washington said.

But Bander said as happy as he is that prosecutors decided not to go forward with an official charge, it does not erase what the Baker Police Department did to Anderson.

Anderson described her arrest and time in jail as hellish.

"I try not to think about it. It was all overwhelming, and it was hell. That's how jail was. Hell," Anderson said.

Although prosecutors declined to pursue the charge, Bander said, Anderson will be forced to file for an expungement of the arrest from her record.

Fabre said his office will not object to Anderson's pursuit of an expungement.

Anderson said her students and the school's staff have been extremely supportive with her return to school.

"Getting back to normal from a difficult situation is what I need to do," she said.

"But I'm not taking it personally. I'm trying to get it all behind me."

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