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ALERT TOP STORY

Former Nardin president files lawsuit, claims 'hatred, vitriol' and more by past and current leaders

Mark Sommer

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Nardin Academy and former trustees and alumni members have been sued by Sandra Better, the school's former president, who was removed from her position in June.

Joshua Bessex/News file photo

Mark Sommer

The former embattled president of Nardin Academy who was terminated in June filed a federal lawsuit Thursday against the private Catholic school and eight former or current board members and others, charging the school with financial improprieties, academic deficiencies, resisting diversity initiatives and defamation.

Sandra Better seeks a jury trial to consider her allegations and award damages to compensate her for economic losses, mental anguish, and damage to her personal and professional reputation.

She also asks to be reinstated to her former Nardin job.

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Nardin identifies its values as serving the world with “dignity, humbleness and compassion. Nothing could be further from the truth,” according to the lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court in Buffalo.

“Dr. Betters was faced with a school community full of hatred, vitriol, hysteria and retaliatory intent. Board of Trustees members screamed in her face, threatened her and knowingly spread mistruths about her; faculty members secretly recorded her, spread private and sensitive information about the ... health of her child (who was a student at Nardin), and wrote false complaints in an effort to get Dr. Betters removed from her position; and community members, fueled by lies and false rumors, repeatedly defamed her online and in the media,” the lawsuit claims.

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Defendants named are Marsha Sullivan, Betters’ predecessor and current board chairwoman; former board members Michael Lawley and Frank Ewing; current and former trustees Luke Jacobs and Charlie Chiampou; former AP high school English teacher Trish Lorence and her husband, Kent; and Therese Forton-Barnes, an alum who helped spearhead Nardin Together, a group that called for change.



Nardin Academy senior Lillian Morgan talks to The Buffalo News about her support for teachers at the school.

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Rebecca R. Reeder, interim president at the school, sent an email to Nardin parents Thursday afternoon, telling them school administrators and staff have worked hard this summer to prepare for the start of the new school year in two weeks – and bracing them for what they learn about the lawsuit.

“We will defend Nardin energetically and truthfully,” Reeder wrote. “We deeply appreciate the support we have received from the Western New York community as we move forward. Our focus is to prepare for a successful start to the new academic year and we will not allow any outside distractions to impact our day-to-day activities.”

Bettors is represented by Michael J. Willemin of Wigdor law firm in New York City. Among allegations:

- Nardin’s financial situation was impacted by “several significant financial improprieties,” including unauthorized spending by Sullivan, “self-dealing” conflicts by several board members and staff; and unlawful use of federal dollars provided through the Paycheck Protection Program during the early stages of Covid-19, including the diversion of funds for use in capital projects.
- Many faculty, staff, trustees and community members were “fiercely opposed” to diversity initiatives.
- New York’s Education Law was violated, including falsely reporting the number of days of instruction.
- Bettors was the victim of “an orchestrated campaign to silence and force her out of Nardin.”



The two-year tenure of Bettors, who submitted her resignation before her removal, was marked by widespread calls for her resignation by faculty, alumni and parents. The Nardin Academy Board of Trustees was ousted by the Paris-based Society of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary,



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the religious order that founded and oversees the 166-year-old institution. The newly installed board then removed Better's from her positions as president and ex-officio board member after failing to reach a financial settlement.

Former trustees Ewing and Lawley rejected Better's claims.

"Our clients are shocked but not surprised that the plaintiff would bring such baseless and defamatory claims against them," attorneys Dennis C. Vacco and Amy Habib Rittling said in a statement. "Unfortunately, the plaintiff attempts to rewrite an account of her failed tenure at Nardin, and we look forward to aggressively responding to these false allegations and setting the record straight."

While not a subject in the lawsuit, the filing implies high school teacher Marilou Bebak used the full "N-word" to make a point to a Black student in March 2023 about how harmful the student's use of the word "retarded," which Bebak called the "R-word," was to some people. The lawsuit spells out the full word five times, while adding, "(according to her story, 'the N-word')."

The Buffalo News spoke with three students in the class that day who said Bebak did not use the full word.



Nardin Academy announces new leadership after tumult

Putting Bebak on administrative leave in April was a flashpoint after criticisms of Better's that had been building through the 2022-23 school year from faculty at all four school levels and among parents and alumni. The board leadership, headed by Tish Van Dyke, a staunch backer of Better's, also came under heavy criticism from the Nardin community.

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In April, nine of the board's 24 trustees, along with three donors – Daniel and Leslie Keane, Kenneth and Katherine Koessler and the Gioia family – called for Better and Van Dyke to resign. The donors said they would withhold future contributions until that occurred.

A petition on **change.org** garnered more than 2,000 signatures calling for Better to resign. More than 250 students, led by high school seniors, **staged a walkout** in mid-April in support of faculty and calling for a change in school leadership.

Some 22 former members of Nardin's board of trustees also wrote to the current trustees in support of the movement and to "resolve this situation immediately." Later, 71 parents signed pledges not to have their students return in the fall without a change in leadership.

On May 3, the school announced Better's resignation. The same day, the nine trustees who weeks earlier had called on Better and Van Dyke to resign were themselves forced to step down.



Students at Nardin Academy walk out of school on Thursday, April 13, 2023, to support teachers and protest the educational climate at the private Catholic school.

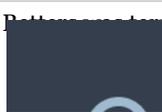
Derek Gee/Buffalo News

The release of a study days later, by a law firm, done at the behest of the board leadership, announced Better had been exonerated of all complaints leveled against her. The statement failed to provide details on what she had been accused of or how the conclusion was reached, and no one was made available to The News to offer further explanation.

A Nardin Together leader was quick to call the study "a whitewash."

The board was ousted on May 29, and Better was terminated by the new board on June 16.

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