

## Columbia Teacher Placed on Leave After Arrest

A Columbia High School physical education teacher arrested Monday for allegedly inappropriately touching a student—an incident his attorney said was accidental contact—has been placed on leave.

In a letter to parents Tuesday, Principal John P. Sawchuk wrote that the district placed Bernard Watt, a gym teacher at the school for more than 22 years, on administrative leave pending an internal district investigation.

After accusations from a 16-year-old female student in his class, Watt, 47, was arrested Monday by East Greenbush police and charged with misdemeanors of forcible touching and endangering the welfare of a child.

Watt's attorney, Thomas Carr, said Tuesday that the incident in question, which occurred on Feb. 2 during Watt's gym class, was an unintentional physical collision.

"Mr. Watt was conducting basketball drills with students, in the course of which he collided with the complainant," he said.

"This kind of allegation is one that is easily made and can damage a career."

He said he expects further investigation by authorities will find that no criminal activity occurred, and that media reports of the event could cause unnecessary worrying from school parents.

Carr noted that an initial review by the school resulted in no action being taken. It was then that the student approached the police, he said.

About 25 students and one administrator were present at the time of the incident, Carr said.

Police have statements from at least two student witnesses. Carr said he viewed one of them, and said the witness was on the other side of the gym, and suggested the student was too far away to see the incident clearly.

In his letter to parents, Principal Sawchuk assured them that the school would fully cooperate with police in their investigation.

Messages left for Sawchuk were not returned, and police investigators could not be reached late Tuesday afternoon. These are not the first allegations of inappropriate behavior on Watt's part. He was placed on probation and fined by the school in 2005 for making inappropriate comments to a female athlete, though no criminal charges were filed.

He is also a noted soccer coach. He is the head coach of the Adirondack Lynx, a woman's soccer team, and is the director and owner of Schodack-based Soccer Watt Academy, which has trained everyone from Major League Soccer players to youth, according to its Web site.

Once a professional soccer goaltender, Watt has also coached at Union College, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the College of St. Rose and UAlbany, according to the Web site.

Watt was released on his own recognizance Monday and is scheduled to reappear in East Greenbush Town Court on March 5.