

Class Sounds Sour Note With Parent

By Ray Palma

Violin instruction is not music to the ears of Water Mill resident Michelle Phillips, who has become embroiled in fight over her son, Kyle, and his Southampton Elementary School music class.

The dispute began last June when Phillips wrote a letter to both Principal Celia Domenech and Superintendent Richard Malone requesting Kyle's schedule be amended upon entering fourth grade in September. Phillips asked the school to allow Kyle to skip the music class and be permitted to go to the library instead.

According to Phillips, after finding her son "adamant" about not wanting to

take the class, she thought a letter with her wishes sent to the proper school administrators would solve the problem. "I wrote several letters to the principal and to the superintendent with several phone calls starting back in June and throughout the summer," she said.

Phillips said she got an immediate reply from Domenech that "if you wish your son Kyle not participate in the program, it will become your responsibility to remove him from the school during that time." Domenech also explained Phillips would need to compensate for Kyle missing the music lesson by providing him with private music lessons. The principal also said no other adjustments could be made to Kyle's schedule.

However, several other parents of Southampton Elementary School pupils said they were accommodated when they asked for their children to be excused from the same music class. Marie Beller's daughter attended several of the violin classes before asking to be excused and was granted permission to skip the sessions.

"I wrote a note to the school telling them to put my daughter in library instead of going to the class," Beller said. "Six or seven kids went with her." Robin Blackey said her son Adam was also excused from the music lessons.

"He plays the trumpet, so on Friday he'd go to lessons in the morning before going to school and then he'd go to the

library when the other kids went to the violin class," Blackey said. "It seems bizarre to make her (Phillips) remove her child when he could go to the library as my son did with others."

Although children at the fourth-grade level already met state requirements for music instruction by enrolling in a chorus, the Southampton School Board voted this year to require the violin class, Malone said. Kyle Phillips cannot go to the library in lieu of the music class because it would be "inappropriate" for him to be there with younger children, Malone added.

While Malone acknowledged that last year other children were able to go to the library during the violin instruction, he said the school schedule was different then, and no such accommodation could be made this year.

For now Phillips has been removing her son from school on Fridays after attendance is taken and he has gotten his school work for the day. "There is no way I can leave my job and pick up Kyle during the violin class and then return him afterwards," she said. "It would interfere with my job."

This is not the first time Phillips has fought with the school district. Last year after learning that the school dropped gym class from a couple of times a week to one, she eventually filed a complaint with the state Department of Education (DOE). "The school had an open house and I learned that my son was only going to have one gym class," Phillips said. "These days a physically fit body is just as important as a fit mind. It's stressed so much more than it was years ago."

The DOE, in a written judgment, determined that more than one gym class was required under their guidelines throughout the calendar week. However, school officials denied physical education is given only on a weekly basis. Those officials also said other classes constitute physical education by being physical in nature, such as recess. Phillips challenged that presumption, noting that teachers and instructors are not certified in physical education.

Phillips said she intended to keep up the pressure on the district over the music class issue. "I will go to the state again if they continue to insist I have to remove Kyle from the school in order for him not to go to violin class," she said.



SPELLING CHAMPS—The East End Catholic School Spelling Champions are, from left, Nicholas Allen, grade 6, from Stella Maris; Shannon Boutcher, grade 7, from Our Lady of the Hamptons; and Gregory Fein, grade 8, from St. John the Evangelist. (AB R61F)

PBA Hired Gumshoe To Follow Verbeeck

By Michael P. Conroy

The case against Westhampton Beach Village Police Officer Thomas Verbeeck continued the last week of November with the testimony of Westhampton Village Police Officer Frederick Hager.

Hager, who is currently president of the Westhampton Village Police Benevolent Association (PBA), was one of six local village police officers scheduled to take the stand in the six-month long case against Verbeeck.

The other officers scheduled to testify were either on vacation or would not testify without legal council present during direct and cross examination.

Hager also testified against Verbeeck

during the original hiring against the Westhampton officer. During his testimony, the officer said three other cops including Neil Hannahan, Jack Havens and Steve Cunneen spent PBA funding to hire a private investigator from Amityville, John Leeson, to follow Verbeeck and take pictures of him meeting with Westhampton Village Trustee James Czachur.

Hager said he knew about the hiring of Leeson; however, did not recall how long the investigation was and what it cost. Several pictures surfaced from the investigation showing Verbeeck entering Czachur's Riverhead office. Allegations that Czachur and Verbeeck were close friends and had conspired to remove town employees, specifically police officers were "well known," said Hager.

The question of the legality of the PBA hiring a private investigator is being questioned by Verbeeck's defense team.

When defense lawyer Raymond Perini asked Hager if he told or threatened Westhampton Village Trustee Dr. Thomas Pescod to "keep out of the Verbeeck situation," Hager said he recalled talking with Pescod, but did not recall the topic of the conversation.

Pescod testified earlier last month that several officers and other town employees told him not to investigate the charges against Verbeeck. He also testified village attorney Anne Scricca told him to destroy paperwork on the Verbeeck situation.

Hager also testified he drafted a letter, which was later printed in a local newspaper as an ad, expressing the opinion of the

PBA on the relationship between Verbeeck and the department as well as the Verbeeck and village board members.

For many of the questions raised by Perini during the testimony of Hager, the officer answered with "I do not recall."

Village council Kevin Kearon had only one question which was whether or not Hager voted, as a PBA member, to give Verbeeck \$4,000. Hager said he did vote. Perini asked his final question which was, "What was your vote?" Hager answered, "No."

Officer Neil Hannahan was expected to take the stand on Tuesday, December 9. Information on testimony of the other witnesses was not available by press time.