

LOCAL

Girl bitten by dog at school undergoes reconstructive surgery, files claim

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Eight-year-old Leilani Rivera was in her second-grade class at Wayside Elementary on May 9 when a volunteer reader came into the classroom with an associate and two dogs.

After the reading was done, the children were allowed by the reader to pet the dogs, and Leilani wanted to participate. As she went in to give one of the dogs a hug, she said, the dog bit her in the face, splitting her bottom lip and cutting her right cheek.

"I was crying. It was really painful," Leilani said.

Leilani quickly underwent reconstructive surgery to her face at Kern Medical Center. While she is in the process of recovering, she can only be fed liquids through a syringe in her mouth. She is also taking several medications to help with the healing and the pain.

"I broke down in tears," Leilani's aunt, Andrea Gonzalez, said about when she arrived at the hospital and saw the state her niece was in. "I'm still very upset and hurt. She's been so brave, but it's been a struggle be-



JOSEPH LUIZ / THE CALIFORNIAN

During a press conference on Thursday, Chain Cohn Stiles attorney Matthew Clark, far right, speaks about how 8-year-old Leilani Rivera was bitten by a dog while in class at Wayside Elementary on May 9. To Leilani's right is her aunt, Andrea Gonzalez. See more photos at Bakersfield.com.

cause she's in pain every day."

Now that Leilani has begun the healing process, the law firm Chain Cohn Stiles has filed a claim against the Bakersfield City School District and the Kern County Superintendent of Schools on behalf of Leilani's family alleging negligence in allowing the dogs in a classroom.

The claim is seeking coverage of Leilani's medical bills and other damages,

but does not specify a dollar amount except that it is more than \$25,000.

"As a parent, you don't expect when you take your child to school in the morning and drop them off at a place that's supposed to be safe that they're going to get bit by a dog. That's the last expectation," said attorney Matthew Clark.

Clark said that to the law firm's knowledge, the dogs that were brought by the volunteer, Ann Ardell

— named Fred and Barney — are akitas or chows and should not have been allowed into a classroom due to their propensity for violence.

"Those are two breeds of dogs that are excluded on almost every homeowner's policy in California because they're considered a known dangerous breed," he said. "They're dangerous enough that (companies) are unwilling to insure that type of dog, so the fact that they

were brought into a second-grade classroom and put in close proximity to 8-year-old students is just unacceptable."

BCSD said in a statement that school officials immediately sought medical aid for Leilani and have begun an investigation.

"Our hearts go out to the student and family affected by the incident ... at Wayside Elementary School. The safety and well-being of our students is our top priority," the district said. "While the district is not able to discuss the incident that occurred or the investigation, please be assured that we are continuing to prioritize the needs of our students."

The district said it is reaching out to Wayside parents to answer any questions they may have about the attack. Counseling services are also available to students.

While Clark said Ardell had come to classrooms in the past to read to students as part of KCSOS' Community Reading Project, this most recent incident was the only time that dogs had been brought in.

KCSOS provided the fol-

lowing statement about the attack:

"First and foremost, our hearts go out to Leilani Rivera and her family for this unfortunate accident. Since 1999, KCSOS has trained Community Reading Project volunteers in guided oral reading strategies so they are prepared to help local second grade students improve their reading skills. Volunteers are then fingerprinted and partnered with participating schools. Due to pending litigation, we are unable to comment further at this time."

Gonzalez said she hopes the attack will lead BCSD to change its policies about who is let on campus.

"I just want to see a change and make sure this doesn't happen to any other child," she said.

Leilani said she's been at home since the attack, but is looking forward to getting better and being able to return to class.

"I want to go back to school. I miss going to school," she said.

Joseph Luiz can be reached at 395-7368. You can also follow him on Twitter @JLuiz_TBC.

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