

# N.J. school board called FBI on Muslim teacher after firing, lawsuit says

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**RARITAN TWP.** — Sireen Hashem, a Muslim teacher at Hunterdon Central Regional High School, had just lost her job in what she described in [a lawsuit as a firing motivated by religion discrimination](#) when the FBI came knocking on her door in July.

The agents told Hashem they were investigating a report that she told school board members "they would be sorry" if they didn't reconsider the decision not to renew her contract as she made a plea to keep her job in June.

"This is a teacher, a very qualified and very loved, very competent teacher, working for the benefit of the school. She was humiliated, discriminated against, and dismissed," Hashem's attorney, Omar Mohammedi, said Friday.

"But they didn't stop there," he said. "They went on and called the FBI on her. This is very problematic, and very dangerous. The treatment is beyond comprehension."

Hashem, an Arab and Palestinian Muslim, filed the religious discrimination lawsuit in federal court in Newark this week.



Hunterdon Central High School in a file photo.

## Muslim teacher files lawsuit alleging religious discrimination led to firing

The teacher claims she was prevented from discussing topics covered by her colleagues and teaching the way her colleagues taught.

The 17-page lawsuit details two years of interactions between Hashem and those named as defendants leading up to the decision not to renew her contract with the district. The defendants include Hunterdon Central Regional District Superintendent Christina Steffner, high school Principal Suzanne Cooley, and two teachers who supervised her, Robert Zywicki and Rebecca Lucas.

Steffner released a statement Thursday saying, "I respect the personnel confidentiality rights of all employees, and it would be inappropriate for me to publicly comment about job performance or personnel matters.

"However, I want to very clearly state that Ms. Hashem's allegations against me are untrue. I have never made a personnel decision based on any improper purpose. The statements attributed to me are factually wrong, and may even be defamatory. It is unfortunate that the district and I will have to defend this case, but will do so vigorously, so that the real facts may be presented in court. After an appropriate review of the allegations, further comments may be provided."

Hashem's lawsuit argues that her problems with school officials began in October 2013 when she used a video featuring Malala Yousafzai, a young girl who survived being shot in the head by the Taliban, during a lesson. She used the video after another teacher, who had also used the video in class, recommended it, according to the suit.

The school's principal received a complaint from a parent and Hashem was called to a meeting where she was told "she could not teach current events in the same manner as her non-Arab, non-Palestinian and non-Muslim colleagues," the suit states.

Additional incidents questioning her methods of teaching followed, the lawsuit says. In an elective class, Hashem used the book "The Lemon Tree," a book about Arab-Israeli relations, for discussion. In another lesson, she asked students to compare the actions of John Brown at Harper's Ferry to those of Osama bin Laden on Sept. 11, 2001, the lawsuit says.

When a parent complained about the bin Laden exercise, "Cooley told Plaintiff that she should not mention Islam or the Middle East in her class," the lawsuit said, adding that Cooley "further stated that plaintiff should not bring her culture, life experience or background into the classroom."

In a September 2014 meeting, the lawsuit argues Steffner "accused her of not sticking to the curriculum, questioned her about her teaching and how it related to the common core, accused her of discriminating against Jewish students, and also questioned her about her place of birth, her family, and her personal life."

She was notified in April that her contract was not being renewed, and she pleaded her case before the board in June. Her employment was terminated on June 30.

The final interaction alleged in the lawsuit came when the FBI came to Hashem's home in Franklin, Somerset County, asking about what she said during the closed-door executive session with the board of education on June 15.

Hashem denies making the statement, and in her lawsuit she argues "this erroneous and defamatory allegation must have originated from the defendant board" because it allegedly occurred outside the public meeting.

Hashem's suit says that about 60 students and parents appeared at the June board meeting to support her. But the board's attorney turned nearly all of them away, the suit states.

"Approximately five individuals were permitted to enter, one at a time, to speak in support of the plaintiff," according to the lawsuit, adding that the board's "deliberations were held in private."



## Hunterdon Central students react to firing of Muslim teacher

Former and current Hunterdon Central Regional High School students reacted on social media to the termination of history teacher Sireen Hashem, who filed a discrimination lawsuit against the district's Board of Education, superintendent, principal and two teachers in federal court Monday, Dec. 14, 2015.

Current and former students at Hunterdon Central [have taken to Twitter](#) using the hashtag [#fightforhashem](#) to express their support.

"A lot of people are supporting her," Mohammedi said. "They were supporting her when this was happening to her — teachers, parents, students."

"They could not do anything," Mohammedi said. At the June 15 school board meeting, "they wanted to discuss their dismay" and ask the board to overturn its decision not to renew her contract, but weren't allowed, he said.

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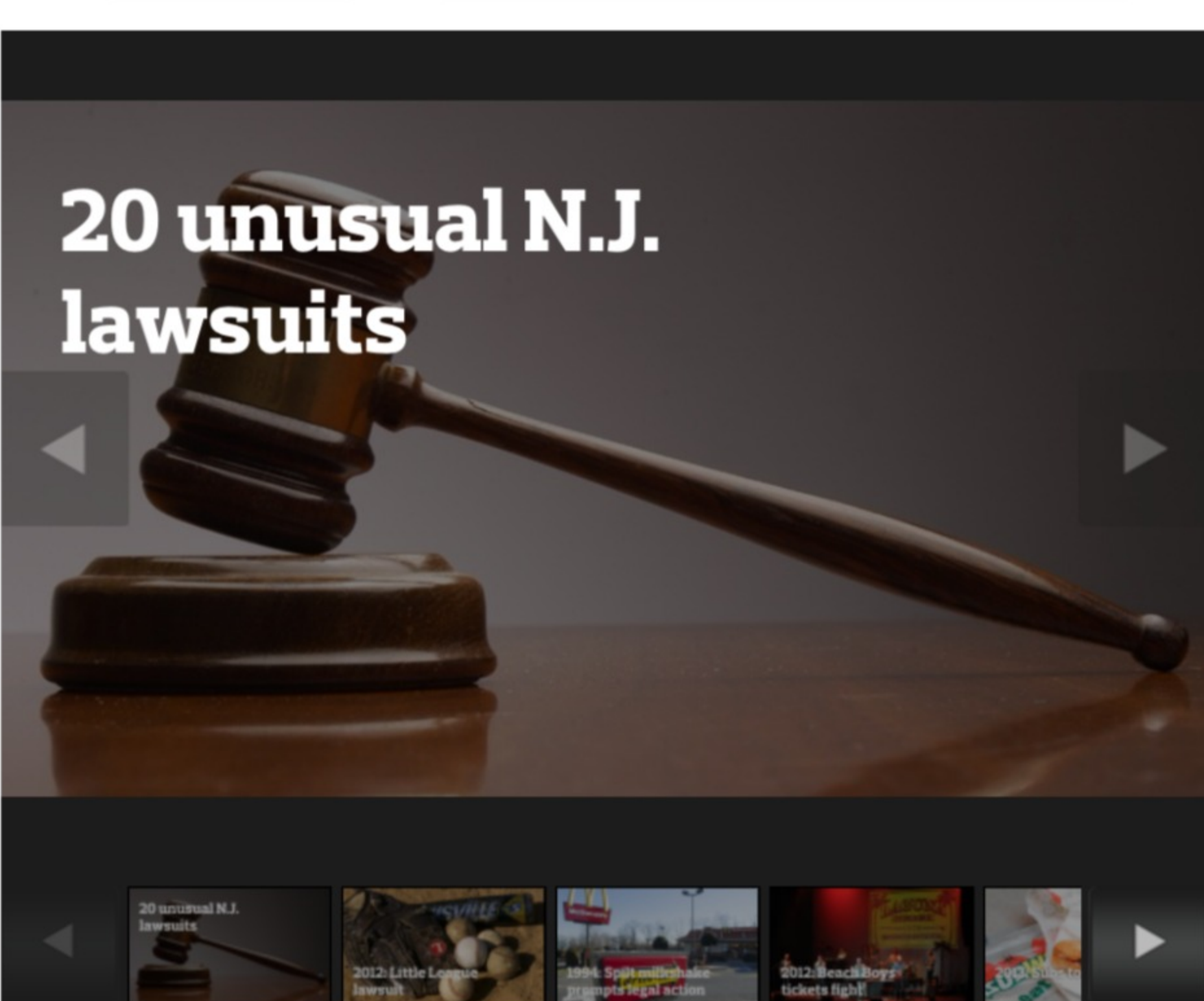
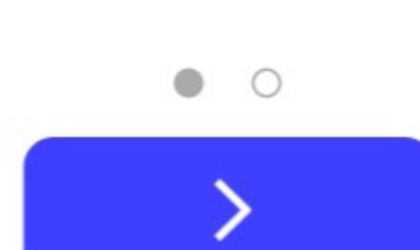
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