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More sexual abuse charges pending against former bus driver

MOLLY SMITH | STAFF WRITER 12 hrs ago



Jose Luis Garza

The Hidalgo County Sheriff's Office confirmed Tuesday it is investigating additional child sexual abuse cases involving a former charter school bus driver.

Deputies arrested Jose Luis Garza, 59, last Friday and he has since been arraigned on three counts of continuous sexual abuse of a young child, a first-degree felony carrying a sentence of up to life in prison if convicted.

Garza was employed as a school bus driver at IDEA Mission North until April 23 when he was terminated, according to IDEA Public Schools.

The district previously placed him on administrative leave within 24 hours of a "very brave student and her mother" reporting to the campus principal that Garza had touched her inappropriately as she walked down the bus aisle, said IDEA Public Schools CEO Tom Torkelson.

The three counts on which Garza was arrested are tied to a 5-year-old and two 8-year-old students, all of whom are female and who alleged to Child Advocacy Center staff and a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner during the course of the sheriff's investigation that he sexually assaulted them with his fingers over a period spanning from August 2017 to May of this year.

As part of its internal investigation following the first student's outcry of sexual abuse, IDEA Mission North administrators spoke with students who rode Garza's bus and scheduled meetings with their parents, Torkelson said.

"As soon as we got enough information that clearly something happened and there was a lot of corroboration from one witness to another, we let the authorities know," Torkelson said, adding that the district reached out to sheriff's office, the Mission Police Department and Child Protective Services.

IDEA Mission North only communicated the allegations against Garza to parents of students who rode his bus, Torkelson said, noting that since The Monitor first reported Garza's arrest, the district "has been flooded with phone calls from parents wanting more information..."

"It's heartbreaking and very, very, very horrible that any young child or family would have to go through this," he said. "We need to do all we can to help parents and students."

Torkelson urged parents to talk to their children — "Remind them about inappropriate comments or touches, etc. And if your child has been the victim of this tell us, tell the authorities," he said. "We need a full accounting. If your child has information because they witnessed this, contact the school or the authorities."

IDEA hired an independent outside investigator to lead their internal investigation "on what happened and making sure our response continues to be appropriate," Torkelson said.

"I think it's really important to figure out precisely what happened and anything that we do moving forward ... you have to ask yourself if we had this in place, would it have deterred or provided evidence to have stopper this sooner," he said.

IDEA Mission North serves students in kindergarten through fourth grade and sixth to eighth grade, and Garza was one of nearly a dozen bus drivers. He remains in custody at the Hidalgo County Adult Detention Center on a \$320,000 bond.

The investigation into Garza is “ongoing ... with additional charges to follow,” according to an HCSO news release.

Criminal complaints tied to his arrest identified a total of six victims aged 5 to 9 years old, but Garza has only been arraigned on three counts of continuous sexual abuse of a young child.

Anyone with information regarding the investigation is asked to contact the sheriff’s criminal investigations division at (956) 973-7880 or its east substation at (956) 973-7880.

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MORE INFORMATION



IDEA Public Schools bus driver faces child abuse charges

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