

## Teacher lets Morningside students vote out classmate, 5

By Colleen Wixon

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PORT ST. LUCIE — Melissa Barton said she is considering legal action after her son's kindergarten teacher led his classmates to vote him out of class.

After each classmate was allowed to say what they didn't like about Barton's 5-year-old son, Alex, his Morningside Elementary teacher Wendy Portillo said they were going to take a vote, Barton said.

By a 14 to 2 margin, the students voted Alex — who is in the process of being diagnosed with autism — out of the class.

Melissa Barton filed a complaint with Morningside's school resource officer, who investigated the matter, Port St. Lucie Department spokeswoman Michelle Steele said. But the state attorney's office concluded the matter did not meet the criteria for emotional child abuse, so no criminal charges will be filed, Steele said.

Port St. Lucie Police no longer are investigating, but police officials are documenting the complaint, she said.

Steele said the teacher confirmed the incident took place.

Portillo could not be reached for comment Friday.

Steele said the boy had been sent to the principal's office because of disciplinary issues. When he returned, Portillo made him go to the front of the room as a form of punishment, she said.

Barton said her son is in the process of being diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a type of high-functioning autism. Alex began the testing process in February at the suggestion of Morningside Principal Marcia Cully.

Children diagnosed with Asperger's often exhibit social isolation and eccentric behavior..

Alex has had disciplinary issues because of his disability, Barton said. After the family moved into the area and Alex and his sibling arrived at the school in January, Alex spent much of the time in the principal's office, she said.

He also had problems at his last school, but he did not have issues during his two years of preschool, Barton said.

School and district officials have met with Barton and her son to create an individual education plan to address his difficulties, she said. Portillo attended these meetings, Barton said.

Barton said after the vote, Portillo asked Alex how he felt.

"He said, 'I feel sad,' " Barton said.

Alex left the classroom and spent the rest of the day in the nurse's office, she said.

Barton said when she came to pick up her son at the school Wednesday, he was leaving the nurse's office.

"He was shaken up," she said.

Barton said the nurse told her to talk with Portillo, who told her what happened.

Alex hasn't been back to school since then, and Barton said he won't be returning. He starts screaming when she brings him with her to drop off his sibling at school.

Thursday night, his mother heard him saying "I'm not special" over and over.

Barton said Alex is reliving the incident.

The other students said he was "disgusting" and "annoying," Barton said.

"He was incredibly upset," Barton said. "The only friend he has ever made in his life was forced to do this."

St. Lucie School's spokeswoman Janice Karst said the district is investigating the incident, but could not make any further comment.

Vern Melvin, Department of Children and Families circuit administrator, confirmed the agency is investigating an allegation of abuse at Morningside but said he could not elaborate.

