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HEADLINE: College discusses next move in discrimination case

BYLINE: By BROOKE DONALD, Associated Press Writer

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BODY:

Rhode Island College officials were discussing Friday how to proceed with a discrimination complaint against a professor who refused to discipline two students who allegedly made racist remarks.

The professor, Dr. Lisa Church, wrote to administrators this week, saying she believes the college should drop the complaint and not conduct any meetings on the matter.

A college spokeswoman said the school hoped to decide by Friday what would happen next, but was obliged to investigate every complaint filed.

The discrimination complaint stems from an incident on Feb. 19, when two students, with children in RIC's preschool, allegedly made racist remarks in conversation with a third student-mother.

Church, who was the coordinator for the cooperative preschool, wasn't present for the conversation, but the offended student complained to her and asked her to discipline the two others.

Church said she couldn't have done so without violating those students' free speech rights. The offended student brought a complaint to school administrators.

"I acted both reasonably and responsibly in refusing to consider any kind of punishment of anyone involved in the conversation," Church said in the letter. "To have punished the participants in the conversation in any way for their offensive remarks would have been to violate their First Amendment rights, and would have put both myself and the college at grave risk of a lawsuit."

A civil liberties advocacy group has joined Church in her effort to have the college stop pursuing the complaint, which they say has no merit.

"This is sadly not unique to Rhode Island College," said Greg Lukianoff, a constitutional lawyer with the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. "Colleges are trying to promote peace and tranquility but at the expense of healthy and meaningful debate."

Lukianoff said Church didn't discriminate against anyone or violate any school policies by not pursuing disciplinary action against the women who allegedly made offensive remarks. He said that even investigating the matter is inappropriate.

"There is nothing to investigate. Dr. Church uttered no offensive words, took no discriminatory action, and upheld her legal duties under the Constitution of the United States with care and integrity," the foundation said in an open letter released Friday.

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