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SOUTH JERSEY

Judge sends ill boy back to school

Thursday, May 29, 2003

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By MATT KATZ
 Courier-Post Staff
 CAMDEN

Steven Wark's days of watching TV, eating Pringles and being home-tutored are over - for now. He heads back to school today.

A federal judge on Wednesday enforced a lower court's order calling for the 11-year-old Woodlyne boy - who suffers from a rare skin disease - to return to his fifth-grade class with his open wounds uncovered.

Steven has epidermolysis bullosa, which causes open wounds on his skin.

When he has worn shorts and T-shirts to Woodlyne Public School this school year, a district-appointed one-on-one nurse assigned to him has wrapped some of his sores with gauze.

The wrapping treatment, which causes irritation, is not recommended by Steven's pediatrician unless the wounds are oozing.

The wrapping treatment continued even after a court order last September directed otherwise.

It happened most recently May 12 when Steven wore summer clothing to school, he said.

His doctors have kept him out of school since then. He has been home-tutored for two hours a day.

Steven shook his head vigorously no when asked Wednesday whether he wants to return to school.

But his mother, Kelly Wark-Jankowski, said Steven is too accustomed to hanging out at home watching the Jerry Springer Show and needs his education.

She sued the school board and the superintendent, saying Steven's federal rights as a disabled student have been violated.

At a hearing Wednesday, lawyers met privately with U.S. District Judge Jerome B. Simandle for more than an hour.

When they emerged, Simandle said Steven would return to school.

The family also seeks \$10,000 in legal fees and wants the district fined for Steven's missed school days. Those matters will be heard at a hearing next month.

For now, Steven's wounds will be wrapped only when they are oozing and only after his one-on-one nurse consults with the school nurse, according to John Wade, Woodlyne school district attorney.

The school district has "followed this procedure over and over," Wade said.

But Jamie Epstein, Steven's attorney, said from now on he expects the nurse to call Wark-Jankowski whenever her son's wounds need to be wrapped.

Wark-Jankowski is skeptical that the arrangement will work.

"I'll end up having to take him out (of school) every day," she said. "As soon as they see it, they're going to wrap it."

Disagreements remain over the apparent communication breakdown between the school medical staff and Steven's personal doctor. Lawyers for each side blamed the other for the fact that the two entities have never spoken directly.

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