Albert Thompson just wanted to give something back to his community. What he got in return was a nightmare.

Six weeks into his stint as a substitute teacher in the Chicago public schools last spring, and after just one day at Fuller Elementary School, 10 students there accused Mr. Thompson of molesting them.

The accusations turned out to be false, but the story made headlines across the nation because of reports that one of the 4th graders had paid nine of her classmates to join her in accusing Mr. Thompson. School officials now say the reports of bribery were incorrect.

No criminal charges were ever filed, and Mr. Thompson was cleared to teach again by the city's school board.

But that did not save his reputation. It also did not protect his dream of becoming a black male role model for inner-city schoolchildren from shattering under the glare of the media spotlight.

'A Rough Day'

Mr. Thompson, who is in his early 40's, has spent most of his professional life as a college administrator. Most recently, he was the director of student activities for Chicago State University.
But as someone who got his master's degree in politics and education from Teachers College, Columbia University, he was always interested in--and critical of--public schools.

So, he figured, he should put himself in the system before he did more bashing.

On May 9, he took over a 4th-grade class of about 30 gifted and talented students at Fuller Elementary on Chicago's South Side.

He acknowledges that they were an unruly class and that he disciplined them. He says he told them he was going to leave a note about their misbehavior for the regular teacher. He knows some of them were worried about the impending bad report.

"It was a rough day for me," he said in a recent interview.

The next day, the children leveled the accusations against him. He first learned of the allegations a day later when a local reporter appeared at his door.

Mr. Thompson said he has forgiven the children and is not bitter. But, he said, "There is nothing I could've done in that class that would warrant my life being put on a block."

"It's the worst type of charge to clear," he added. "Molesting children to me is the worst thing anyone can do in society."

Mr. Thompson said he will not go back to K-12 teaching and is looking for a job in higher education.