

### **III: Best Practices for Prevention of Student Sexual Abuse**

School administrators were asked to rate which practices are most effective in preventing student sexual abuse. Specific areas are defined below in order of importance: 1-3) Reporting, Training, Policy; 4) Hiring, Screening, Interviewing; and 5) Are the preceding procedures actually used (in any recent events, etc.)? Stated practices only protect children if they are actually used – staff, students and leaders need to understand them, be willing to undertake them and have the confidence they will be taken seriously without negative consequences.

#### **1) Reporting**

Above all other procedures, a healthy reporting system protects children and the school best. Early warning is by far the most valuable single element for safety. Timely reports compensate greatly where other components are weak and conversely, prevention will fail where reporting is subverted or flawed no matter how strongly all other practices are integrated. Autopsies of past abuse cases prove that signs are evident in nearly all cases. Yet prevention fails even when evidence is prominent if victims or witnesses are fearful, mistrust the process or staff, or leaders dismiss accounts putting concern for reputation or embarrassment over the safety of children. Key elements required:

Support and protect reporters and victims; Keep names confidential; Encourage questions and reports; Let reporters know that they are immune from civil or criminal liability when making a report; Clearly state which authorities must be contacted; Do not leave to educators the responsibility of investigating suspicions; Hold leaders legally responsible for ensuring all cases are reported to the proper authorities.

Better to have the DA or child protective services settle a few cases where odd behavior was misunderstood than to miss early warning signs of actual ongoing abuse and have the institution enable far worse by denial or inaction.

#### **2) Training**

Abuse prevention fails when reporting and policies are misunderstood, mistrusted or untested. Training also serves to demonstrate that the school's commitment to safety is serious and to motivate staff and students to speak up. Communication reduces myths and resistance, especially when senior leaders are directly involved. Programs and practice with feedback uncover and remove often unrecognized flaws which would otherwise undermine safety. Train all staff -- not just students. Training reinforces procedures people forget or have missed, injects key updates and most important: tests that the system is working before the risk of real-life failure could create a disaster.

Emphasize that reporting suspicions of misconduct is a professional responsibility and a law; Train all staff on appropriate procedures; Train all staff about what constitutes educator sexual misconduct and appropriate boundaries.

Include a case example to test staff understanding. Provide the initial facts and ask what people will do. Discuss each step and then add the next issue to uncover misunderstandings and willingness to take action.

### **3) Policies**

Written policies define action in advance of the complication of incidents. By defining and ironing out the appropriate responses before an emergency, the school avoids delay or confusion when child safety is at risk. Prompt prevention should never require a second or fifth or tenth report of abuse as has sadly been the case in recent school news.

Make clear that there is no such thing as consensual sex between adults employed in schools and students; Include reporting requirements and what constitutes educator sexual misconduct; Make the school district's commitment to abuse prevention clear; Require staff and leader training; Provide guidance in identifying and reporting behaviors that might indicate educator sexual misconduct; Include in staff, student, and parent handbooks; Include a statement about no retaliation.

### **4) Hiring, Screening, and Interviewing**

Hiring staff is an opportunity to avoid mistakes. Though most searches focus on finding the best apparent candidates, the process serves best to reduce or eliminate various risks of failure. Screening out a bad hire depends on whether available flags exist, are uncovered and get considered. One barrier is that schools often have not alerted subsequent employers of past abuse incidents with prospective staff -- thereby putting other students at risk. New laws have been passed or are pending on the state and federal level to limit "passing the trash."

Ask if the applicant has even been convicted of a crime, and if so, what crime(s); Ask for references from a variety of work and volunteer experience sources; Include questions on identification and work history that will facilitate background checks; Include that incomplete or false information can result in termination.

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Much more detailed information on candidates is available today and it's more easily located. Better to find out now than after hiring.

Make child sexual abuse perpetration history an automatic disqualifier; Conduct a state and national criminal background check of records using fingerprint scans; Contact supervisor and two other references at the previous positions; Search sex offender databases; Verify social security number; Ask references about why applicant left previous position.

Ask the applicant to clarify and expand on application answers; Ask open-ended questions to encourage discussion; Inform the applicant of policies on child sexual abuse and code of conduct.

### 5) Closing the gap between written policy and effective practice

In addition to installing the practices listed above, school leaders can further improve prevention and timely response by removing barriers that may stall or disable existing policies from being enforced precisely when needed most. Ask these questions to diagnose any gaps in the system that supports prevention elements.

Recent history, communication, authorities, care for victims, record keeping:

- How have any past reports or early warning signs of abuse been sidetracked?
- Were the victims believed and the abusers met with to resolve allegations?
- Were the police or DA informed?
- How confident are you that all abuse incidents have been reported?
- To what extent are victims willing to come forward and feel safe?

To what degree are you committed to keeping the community informed? Do you ...

- Write and speak with parents and alumni immediately with full disclosure?
- Ask that people with information reach you and/or the authorities?
- Locate and meet with victims to understand what happened?
- Report findings and recommendations of the investigation by police or the school to the entire community?

To what extent are you prepared to locate and counsel victims once a report is known? Do you...

- Have people trained and designated to protect the interests of victims?
- Keep victims informed of your progress to help show changes in your prevention efforts?
- Take care that your process for resolving allegations does not reinjure victims?

Police and the DA have the experience and methods to investigate abuse incidents. Do you...

- Provide the authorities with all records and reports once you are aware of an incident?
- Have a good working relationship with law enforcement in your community?
- Trust the police or DA, where an allegation may turn out not to produce charges, to handle it appropriately?

When a report of abuse is received, to what extent do you know if prior reports were made based on records? Do you...

- Know that staff to whom a victim may report abuse will document the account and inform the head of school?
- Follow up on an initial report by getting further details from the person reporting the information?
- Have an anonymous hotline or similar method to receive and encourage reports?
- Protect the confidences of those who report and assure your community of methods in order to encourage reporting?

Effective response depends on three elements:

- that people understand the system so they and the school can act promptly;
- that those who see something and report feel safe and heard by the school and authorities; and
- that the school says the one thing that truly matters: that they want to know what happened; that if a student was harmed they want to know and help, without judgment.