

# An Epidemic of Shame

**Reports of sexual misconduct by teachers horrify us all, but school leaders can take steps to protect their students from exploitation**

**T**hey appear to be normal. It is not uncommon for them to be popular, well-liked—even distinguished with commendations for exemplary performance in their field. Some are so well-regarded that their victims are afraid to stand up to them for fear of rejection or harassment from peers for getting a popular teacher in trouble.

With alarming regularity, we hear horrific reports of otherwise successful teachers facing criminal charges due to sexual misconduct with students. It's hard to say which is more frightening: that we have yet to figure how to keep these teachers out of the classroom or that the occurrences are so frustratingly common.

A lack of consistency and coordination on many levels of government unwittingly enables abusive teachers to slip through the cracks and move remarkably easily to a neighboring school district or to another state with impunity. This common phenomenon allows a sexual predator to leave quietly and go elsewhere under the radar.

School officials face daunting issues when charging a teacher with sexual misconduct. It is inherently repugnant and, for some, something they would rather not have to address. Moreover, they fear possible backlash from parents and students when confronting a popular teacher. They also worry about potential litigation for making unfounded accusations against a teacher who may claim emotional distress or a damaged reputation.

While the school district may have suspicions over a teacher's behavior, those suspicions can be problematic to prove when witnesses and victims themselves prove reluctant to go forward in the face of a perpetrator's denial.

If an offending teacher resigns and the district fails to prove its case, the teacher is free to move on. In the absence of laws requiring districts to report allegations, your new teacher applicant sitting in your human resources office filling out an application could have been under suspicion at a nearby district.

Another issue that allows for offending teachers to move easily from school to school: the lack of uniform criminal background checks and fingerprinting disclosing interstate criminal history.

School administrators are not mind readers. They cannot

gauge a teacher's moral compass in the interview process, nor do they have any reliable means of measuring a teacher's inclinations to exploit children. That fear was often in the back of my mind as an administrator. Despite extensive vetting, I knew all too well that some teachers had undisclosed baggage.

At no time during my 18 years in the classroom did I ever hear anyone formally talk about improper teacher conduct with students. This is not an easy topic for administrators to discuss without sounding heavy-handed or offensive. None of my undergraduate or graduate education professors addressed this issue, either.

## Boundaries

A fine line exists between encouraging teachers to develop positive student-teacher relationships, yet maintaining a professional distance. Educational practice has shown that how students feel about their teachers influences their behavior and their performance. Good teachers enjoy their students and respect them. They genuinely demonstrate how they care about them and earn their trust.

Where that line must be made clear, however, is ensuring that teachers not regard students as equals or place them on an adult level emotionally, which could lead to the development of a more personal, rather than professional, student-teacher relationship.

That means teachers should never socialize or interact with students in a way that they would socialize or interact with adults; discuss things with them that are personal in nature; or engage them in any way that would erode a professional student-teacher relationship. For example, students should not be burdened with details of a teacher's divorce, personal family issues, social life, partying activities, etc. It sounds like common sense, but it happens all the time.

## Proactive approach

Because teacher sexual misconduct is alarmingly common, a proactive, rather than reactive, approach at the district level is required to address this issue squarely and directly. Don't wait for problems to happen, and then react to them. The goal is to create an environment that is emotionally and physically safe and where teachers and students know *in advance* what

behaviors are both acceptable and unacceptable, as well as the consequences of noncompliance.

Administrators should consider initiating staff development training in a positive and tactful manner. As members of the educational community, teachers and administrators must work together to preserve student trust and preclude incidents that have become all too common in our nation's schools.

When a classroom teacher tells her students that she expects them to respect each other and school property, she is setting the tone and establishing her moral authority and leadership. Administrators do the same thing with teachers when they say that their expectations are that all educators will protect students from exploitation and nurture that special bond that exists between students and teachers

That discussion can lead to acknowledging that it is conceivable for teachers to be falsely and innocently accused of improper conduct with students. Then give them practical safeguards and behaviors to preclude suspicion or the perception of improper conduct.

### Themes to address

A training session could include these topics:

- Positive student-teacher relationships vs. professional distance
- Recognizing the important role of a teacher in preserving trust
- Protecting students from exploitation
- Recommended safeguards to avoid the appearance of misconduct
- Sexual harassment as it applies to the teaching and learning process
- Maintaining professional demeanor
- Protocols for e-mails and texts

As I said earlier, none of these topics was ever discussed at a workshop, inservice, teacher work day, or faculty meeting during my years in the classroom, though there were incidents and rumors that were largely left ignored. Anyone who has ever worked in a school knows that there is an undercurrent code of silence, a pervasive and unspoken reality that exists on many levels that discourages both adults and children from speaking out. We have reached a time when we have to address this issue upfront.

### Supervision is key

The only way teachers can repeatedly have sex with students in school during the school day is if they are confident they won't be discovered by either adults or students.

As an administrator, I spent much of the day out of my office doing "drive-bys," not so much to see but *to be seen*. That included walking through what appeared to be a vacant and darkened classroom, band room, gymnasi-

um, etc. My goal was to show that I could unpredictably be anywhere, at any time, for any reason. Being visible, in and of itself, is a deterrent.

Administrators certainly will not want to resort to draconian tactics in supervising teachers because teachers deserve to be treated as professionals, yet trust in them should never be unfettered or unconditional when children's safety is the first and highest priority.

The number of incidents involving teacher sexual encounters with students outside of school also suggests that these teachers mistakenly believe that what they are doing on their own time is none of the school's business.

The district needs to be clear that *any* sexual contact with a student, regardless of age, is grounds for dismissal, even if it occurs off school grounds.

### Adopt a board policy

Finally, school boards need to formally adopt a policy acknowledging their recognition of the importance of this issue. As always, school districts should consult with legal counsel in drafting such a policy.

Taking these approaches will not eliminate the presence of sexually abusive teachers, but if it helps to give potential predators pause, then at least we have begun to mitigate the problem and convince the community that we are as mindful of our children's well-being as we are of their academic success. Nothing is more important than the safety of our children. ■

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To view a sample school board policy on sexual misconduct by teachers, go online to [ASBJ.com](http://ASBJ.com) August 1 and click on Samuel Spitali's article.

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