

Maintaining SAFE SCHOOLS

Incorporating *Inside School Safety*

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Train staff on how to report suspected abuse by fellow educators

A high school teacher asks a 14-year-old student to text him a photograph of herself. An elementary school teacher repeatedly calls one of her students “idiot” instead of using the child’s name. A paraprofessional regularly strikes a middle schooler with ADHD upside his head to get him to pay attention in class.

Would your employees know what to do if they learned of or witnessed any of those incidents? If not, your district may need to train staff on how to report colleagues suspected of mistreating students.

Some states have expanded their mandatory reporting laws to include suspected abuse by educators as well as suspected abuse or neglect by parents or caretakers. However, regardless of whether state law requires educators to report their colleagues’ suspected mistreatment of students to child welfare authorities, districts must ensure that staff members know how to identify misconduct and take appropriate action.

Focus on prevention, recognition of abuse

Attorney Linda S. Johnson, a director with McLane Middleton in Boston, recommends that all districts hold annual training sessions on the importance of fostering a safe, healthy, positive, and respectful school environment, including training on how educators can set and maintain appropriate boundaries with students. Johnson said this training should focus on two primary areas: 1) understanding the state’s mandatory reporting law; and 2) behavioral expectations for employees.

“Employees should be educated on the key risk areas when interacting with students, which includes understanding what is meant by boundaries, ... the inherent power imbalance as it relates to employees and students, the role the employee plays in the student’s life, and the need for transparency of behavior,” Johnson said.

Rebecca Bevans, the Director of Training and Program Development for Tennessee’s Office of Child Safety, said that a district’s training curriculum should review signs of child abuse as well as “red flags” of dangerous behaviors between an adult and a child.

“Grooming behaviors for child sexual abuse are some of the most common offender behaviors that school personnel should be educated on and able to recognize,” Bevans said. “If staff are trained on these behaviors and how to report, they can help keep children safe.”

Johnson and Bevans both recommended that training sessions include all district employees, including classroom personnel, office staff, and support staff.

Establish clear procedures

It’s not enough for educators to know the signs of potential abuse; they also need to know how to report their suspicions. Bevans said that the district’s training sessions should set forth the specific steps employees should follow when reporting possible misconduct by a colleague.

“This process should be incorporated into regular in-service trainings to ensure staff understand the expectations and are reminded of its importance,” Bevans said. She noted that districts can use posters, infographics, brochures, or other educational materials to remind school personnel of their reporting obligations.

Districts also need to look for any contradictory instructions in their policies. Johnson said many districts have procedures for external reporting, meaning reports to child welfare authorities or local police, as well as procedures for internally reporting misconduct to school- or district-level administrators. She recognized that a district’s adoption of different policies can lead to confusion about how to report

suspected abuse by a fellow educator. Johnson recommended that districts streamline their reporting procedures “as much as possible to avoid this kind of confusion.”

Emphasize student safety to boost compliance

Many educators will be reluctant to report a colleague for suspected abuse of a student. Johnson said that a district might be able to overcome this reluctance by stressing how reporting can (and often does) prevent the escalation of inappropriate behavior and additional harm to the student.

“Hypotheticals during the training can be used to help employees understand the slippery slope that individuals sometimes get on ... and how reporting when there are early signs of inappropriateness can help both the student and the employee,” she said.

Bevans said that districts can bolster educators’ compliance with their reporting obligations by reminding them that child abuse happens in every community.

“Although it may be very uncomfortable or upsetting to report a colleague, it is imperative that a child’s safety is made the top priority,” she said. ■