

Advocates: Setting student-teacher boundaries a tool to curb teacher sex crimes

By Marion Callahan

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After two teacher sex cases in one year, Palisades is the latest Bucks County district to consider adopting a version of Policy 824, which defines what's appropriate conduct between teachers and students. New Hope-Solebury, Bristol Borough, Central Bucks, Council Rock, Pennridge and Pennsbury already have the policy on the books.

A 15-year-old student struggling in math in one Bucks County school district sought help from her teacher. After a few meetings, they exchanged emails, then texts, then pictures. Eventually, the relationship became sexual.

In a neighboring district, a female teacher befriended a male student on Snapchat, then began swapping pictures and text messages; the exchanges eventually led to sex.

Another area teacher gave excessive passes to students, enabling them to cut class and visit his office. The same teacher repeatedly credited students for work that was never completed. A trail of seemingly innocuous behavior ended in sexual assault of several students.

In nearly all cases of sexual crimes involving teachers in the last several years in area districts, perpetrators displayed a trend of "grooming" through behaviors, not illegal, but also "not appropriate," said Matt Lannetti, deputy district attorney and chief of child abuse prosecutions for Bucks County whose office has investigated cases in Palisades, New Hope-Solebury, Central Bucks and Council Rock school districts in recent years.

“Almost every one of these starts with, ‘He or she gave me their cellphone number,” said Lannetti, who said he can’t think of a good reason a teacher should be texting with a student. “It can only lead to bad things.”

Displaying favoritism, sharing Instagram stories or “snaps” with students or oversharing personal details may not be illegal, but a growing number of school districts want to make it clear that for teachers, such exchanges violate professional boundaries.

Many Pennsylvania school districts — including Palisades, which faced two high-profile sexual misconduct cases in one year — are looking to adopt or have adopted a “Maintaining Professional Adult/Student Boundaries Policy,” which spells out boundary-blurring behaviors that can be a precursor to sexual misconduct.

Known as Policy 824, the guidelines prohibit things like sexual talk and eliminates the practice of a teacher being alone in a classroom with a student. Other prohibited actions include sharing personal information; giving gifts; having friendship with students, in person or online; and giving rides to students. At least six area districts have the policy in place, including New Hope-Solebury, Bristol Borough, Central Bucks, Council Rock, Pennridge and Pennsbury.

Policy 824 was crafted by the Pennsylvania School Board Association in 2015 in an update to the state’s Educator Discipline Act that added boundary-blurring behaviors.

Mandy Mundy, senior director of programs and services for the Network of Victim Assistance (NOVA), said the majority of teachers understand their ethical boundaries as professionals. Over the last two years, NOVA has worked in seven Bucks County school districts to provide training for educators, hosting training on the Stewards of Children child sexual abuse prevention program or for mandated reporting of child abuse prevention.

Training at schools, she said, serves as “reinforcement.”

Mundy said she knows that student-teacher relationship-building is a key to the health and wellness of students, but “it needs to maintain boundaries and remain appropriate.”

“It’s not black and white,” Mundy said. “There are many gray areas. This is why conversations and training are so important.”

“Teachers do have an advisory role, but when a teacher becomes a confidant, a friend or a counselor to a student, that dual relation creates ambiguity and roles become less defined. It is in that ambiguity that sexual misconduct could occur for those intentionally creating that dual relationship as part of the grooming process.”

Drawing clear lines

Tinicum resident Sheila Rodgers is part of a community group, “Palisades Parents: Prioritizing Well-being, Success, and Safety,” calling on the district to adopt a policy to better prevent the blurring of boundaries between a teacher-student relationship.

“From a child’s perspective, if teachers are crossing boundaries — even with the best intentions — it leaves the children unable to navigate between normal and potential grooming behavior, and it becomes a cultural norm, and they are not able to see the red flags when an adult has crossed a boundary,” said Rodgers.

The mobilizing of the group came shortly after the January sentencing of former teacher Christian Willman, who faces up to 12 years in state prison for sexually assaulting students at Palisades High School and Parkland High School in Lehigh County, and the Jan. 3 arrest of former teacher Francis Reppert Jr., who is accused of taking “upskirt” photos of students at Palisades High School.

Addressing the school board last month, Rodgers said the policy could serve as a resource document for school employees and as a way to share guidelines for appropriate interactions with other adults who engage with students, such as coaches and volunteers.

“It specifically defines the ‘gray’ zone — behaviors that could be considered unprofessional, illegal, amoral but not necessarily illegal,” she said.

Rodgers was surprised to hear that Palisades had not reviewed the policy, which the Pennsylvania School Board Association recommended in 2016.

New Hope-Solebury School district was among a few local districts to adopt it early on. Though it was enacted before he arrived at the district, Superintendent Charles Lentz said the policy “clears up any uncertainty with what the expectations are.”

“There are times when teachers inadvertently cross the lines,” he said. “If someone is displaying murky behavior and it becomes a pattern, the policy gives us leverage we wouldn’t already have. If some of the things are out of compliance with the policy, it gives us an opportunity for discussion.”

Palisades Superintendent Bridget O’Connell said in a statement the board’s policy committee is now reviewing Policy 824.

She said the district already has in place policies specific to child abuse, acceptable internet and electronic technology use, and on educator misconduct that “set expectations for professional behavior, training and reporting of suspected cases of child abuse.”

She said Policy 824 will help “define examples of prohibited conduct that violates professional boundaries” for both employees and others interacting with students.

In a letter to the Palisades community following both crimes, O’Connell said, “These incidents are more than unacceptable, they are a call to action for us to continue talking with children about staying safe, reporting anything that seems out of line or potentially harmful, and continuing to work together to protect our children.”

Encouraging more reporting

Rodgers hopes the new policy will go beyond “rubber stamping” the state’s model and customize it to Palisades’ needs. She also hopes it will encourage other school personnel, coaches and volunteers with “either calling each other out on behavior that is inappropriate and/or reporting it to administration.”

Deputy District Attorney Lannetti welcomes any policy that helps bring clarity to inappropriate behavior.

“We get reports that ‘so and so’ is engaging in uncomfortable, inappropriate behavior that is not a crime; we may think that’s concerning because it seems like grooming but we can’t prosecute someone for that,” he said. “But if the school has the ability to address the problems beforehand, that’s where prevention happens.”

He said law enforcement gets involved when a crime gets committed. But he said, “If school has the ability to stop it before it happens, with these kinds of internal policies, we are very supportive.”

With two or three cases a year, Lannetti does not believe sexual abuse in schools is on the rise, but believes increased awareness of grooming behavior can only serve to stem cases before they happen. Advances in technology, however, don’t help.

Technology and the ability to use social media and text makes it easier for teachers to engage in sexual relationships with students.

“With Snapchat and text messages — for all the good they do, they also make it easier for someone to carry out these sort of relationships without other people knowing,” Lannetti said.

Finding ways to improve

One Palisades school board member hopes for more than one policy change.

“Policy 824 a great start, but we can do even more,” said Dawn Grochowiak, who is exploring the establishment of a committee to focus on adult sexual misconduct, to address many of the questions still lingering in the school community.

“Sadly, crimes took place in our school and we are healing and trying to move forward. We need to find those weak points and improve,” she said.

For example, she said, Reppert took pictures on his school-issued iPad, authorities said. “Clearly there were vulnerabilities with the monitoring of his use of school-issued technology,” she said.

In the case of Willman, students had opportunities to sign out of class to visit with him. “The issue of sign-out sheets for classrooms and kids skipping class ... There are questions and we need to learn from this. Are we doing everything we can?”

NOVA’s Mundy sees the advantages of creating a policy with a clear set of boundaries and rules, along with “a clear set of actions when those rules are broken.”

“The more we can support the safe sharing of red flags or concerns, the earlier we can intervene and stop or interrupt grooming behavior before a child might be abused — whether it’s part of 824 or any other policy.”

Mundy said abuse thrives in secrecy.

“We need to establish practices and policies that break the silence and allows everyone to feel safe in breaking the silence,” she said.