

Abuse harms both children, teachers

One incident can diminish trust in a school district.

By William C. Kashatus

Recent accusations of sexual abuse by teachers at the Miquon School and Holicong Middle School are not only tragic for the victims and their families, but also for the teaching profession as it tries to serve a growing number of at-risk students.

Because schools have a legal responsibility to protect the physical and emotional welfare of students, prospective teachers in Pennsylvania's public and private schools must first get a criminal-background check from the state police and a statement from the State Department of Public Welfare that they have no record of child abuse.

Still, there can be no guarantee that teachers won't engage in sexual abuse once they are hired. When this happens, the effects can be devastating for their colleagues. Just one incident can diminish the positive attributes of the student-teacher relationship in an entire school district. Often, the immediate result is a new policy that limits a teacher's role in a student's personal development.

The crime also takes a psychological toll. Teachers begin to wonder whether any outward expression of compassion for a student — gift-giving, an encouraging pat on the back, or even accepting a hug — will be misinterpreted as unprofessional. Some students may wonder if they can trust a teacher who expresses a genuine interest in their academic or personal development. That kind of second-guessing is tragic because good teaching is a very personal business.

Twenty years ago, when I was trying to decide whether to pursue a career in secondary education, I sought the advice of a high school teacher whom I highly regarded. "If you want to be a good teacher," he told me, "you must first come to terms with the fact that you aren't going to be teaching history. You're going to be teaching kids and helping them to develop a sense of self-esteem. It's an 'around-the-clock' job and the toughest one you'll ever love."

He was absolutely correct. Good teachers understand and routinely meet the intellectual and personal needs of their students because they care about them. Their compassion is needed more today than ever before.

Some students struggle with the painful effects of divorce, death, violence or drug abuse in their homes. They want to be respected and loved by the adults who are a daily presence in their lives.

But when sexual abuse occurs, schools become less willing to actively promote a culture of caring between teachers and students. School administrators and parents must realize that educating young



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hearts and minds is more than a function of what good teachers do for a living; it's also who they are as caring human beings. Schools should be places where students can learn how to receive and demonstrate care-giving. And where it is a matter of decent human relations for teachers and students to exchange three simple

phrases — "Thank you," "I'm sorry" and "I care" — and to do so without fear or distrust of one another.

To be sure, there must be no tolerance for any teacher who sexually abuses a student. Still, schools cannot afford to punish good, compassionate teachers for doing their jobs. Dealing with sexual abuse by establishing increasingly rigid policies on student-teacher relationships is not the proper solution. It serves only to make good, caring teachers less willing to demonstrate their compassion for students.

Instead, schools must exercise better judgment in where they place teachers, particularly within certain age groups. They must do more to mentor younger, inexperienced faculty, and to open communication with parents about the responsibilities of teachers toward their students.

All three parties — administrators, teachers and parents — must work together to ensure the safety and care of students.

Ultimately, youngsters will work harder for teachers they love and respect. I know I did for mine.

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