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Report: State needs to better track teachers convicted of crimes

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DETROIT (AP) -- A state auditor general report and a newspaper investigation have found that Michigan's Department of Education has failed to adequately track teachers convicted of sexual assault and other crimes.

The Department of Education maintains it aggressively goes after abusive teachers. But inadequate tracking of teachers, incomplete criminal background checks and poor communication among various agencies have allowed potentially abusive teachers to slip through the cracks, The Detroit News reported in its Sunday edition.

Several teachers convicted of crimes against minors never had their certification revoked, the newspaper found. The Department of Education says it never heard of these convictions from local prosecutors.

Liz Boyd, a spokeswoman for Gov. Jennifer Granholm, said Sunday that Granholm has directed her staff to develop proposals on how to better protect children from sexual predators.

"It's a priority for this administration," she said.

The convicted teachers whose certifications were not revoked include Matthew Mankoff, 29, a former Deckerville Community Schools band teacher, who was sentenced in 2003 to one to five years in prison for trying to meet an undercover officer, posing as a minor on the Internet, for sex; and William Ayler, 51, a former Detroit Public Schools teacher who pleaded guilty in 1997 to one count of second-degree criminal sexual conduct.

Oakland County Prosecutor David Gorcyca said his office alerted Detroit Public Schools about Ayler's arrest, but not of the conviction.

"We are a little bit at fault in some fashion," Gorcyca said, "although they were placed on notice of the charges and the fact it was awaiting charges in circuit court."

Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Maria Miller declined to comment on whether the department notified the state of Mankoff's conviction. Mankoff's certification recently expired, the Department of Education said.

"It's been our routine practice to send a letter to notify the school where the person is employed when the case is bound over," Miller said. "And then we notify the state upon conviction. We are going to modify the procedure now that we have discovered this problem to make sure we get a written verification or confirmation that the notification has been received."

A state auditor general report released in 2004 concluded the Department of Education needs to do a better job of tracking criminal convictions, documenting current teachers and updating the records of teachers who have been decertified.

The audit found that 222 licensed school workers, mostly teachers, had criminal records; and that the state did not know about 178 of them. Five employees had convictions for robbery, assault and criminal sexual conduct; others had been arrested for shoplifting or alcohol-related offenses.

"I think the auditor general report made us aware that the system that we had been relying on had not been working," said interim state superintendent of education Jeremy Hughes.

As part of its response to the audit, the department announced in December it will now check the criminal histories of all teachers twice a year through the Michigan State Police. The background checks will only cover Michigan, however.

But not all adults who work in schools are required to undergo any background checks. State law requires FBI and state criminal background checks on new teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, nurses, social workers, school psychologists and bus drivers. Special education paraprofessionals, janitors, cafeteria workers, coaches and others in contact with children are not covered.

The father of one girl who was raped is lobbying for the state to require nationwide criminal background checks for paraprofessionals.

Yves Champ't's daughter was raped by a former special education paraprofessional she had met while the man worked in the Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District. The man, Terry Neff, was sentenced this month to 30-60 years in prison for the attack.

Police say Neff had a felony drug conviction in Indiana for which he served prison time, but education officials never knew about it.

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