

October 17, 2005

## Schools' dirty little secret

### ■ Sexual abuse is main reason teacher licenses are revoked

By The Associated Press

Sexual abuse of students is the No. 1 reason public school teachers have lost their licenses in West Virginia during the past five years, amounting to about 35 percent of all teaching certificates being pulled.

The percentage could be even higher. Another 19 percent lost their licenses because of misconduct with students, but West Virginia Department of Education records obtained with a Freedom of Information Act request do not specify if the misconduct was sexual, according to a review by The Associated Press.

Also, since July 1, 2000, the state Board of Risk and Insurance Management has paid \$6.9 million to settle 17 claims involving teacher misconduct with students, according to agency records.

Sexual misconduct by teachers remains a dirty little secret in schools across the nation even though nearly one in 10 students will be abused by a teacher before they graduate, according to studies conducted by Dr. Charol Shakeshaft, a professor at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y.

"There are about 4.5 million kids who, right now, would say they have been the target of physical sexual misconduct," Shakeshaft said. "And only about 10 percent of the sexual exploitation going on ever gets reported."

While most parents regard schools as sanctuaries, roughly 290,000 students nationwide experienced some sort of physical sexual abuse by a public school employee from 1991 to 2000. Most offenders are male, often coaches, music instructors and popular teachers who have access and opportunity.

"The problem in education dwarfs the Catholic Church problem," said John Seryak, an Ohio teacher and author of "Dear Teacher, If You Only Knew!"

"What makes it so traumatic is the violation of the sacred trust. The sacred trust placed in teachers is no different from that placed in parents, priests or ministers."

Since 2000, 118 of West Virginia's 24,000 teachers permanently or temporarily lost their licenses for reasons ranging from sexual misconduct and harassment to insubordination and drunkenness. About 75 percent were permanent revocations, the rest were temporary suspensions for offenses such as cheating on standardized tests.

Among the 118 were 41 teachers who lost their licenses for sexual assault or abuse of a student, which varied from inappropriate touching to sodomy, according to the AP's review.

"That parallels West Virginia's low crime rate," said Karen Huffman, director of professional preparation for the state Department of Education. "Nevertheless, each one has to be investigated and taken seriously."

Another 22 teachers lost their licenses for inappropriate conduct with a student, which could include a sex-related offense. One case of statutory rape resulting in pregnancy was listed in this category.

Department of Education lawyer Heather Deskins said teachers try to hide the reason for their revocations by voluntarily surrendering their licenses to avoid a hearing.

Of those who lost their licenses for a sex-related offense, only four are on the West Virginia State Police sex-offender Web site.

Only offenders who are required to register for life are on the Web site, said State Police Maj. Dave Williams.

To be placed on the list, offenders must be ruled a violent sexual predator or a repeat offender or their victim must have been a minor. Although students are minors, their abusers often plead to lesser offenses that do not require registration, Williams said.

In her draft report to the U.S. Department of Education, Shakeshaft concluded that not enough was known about the

prevalence of sexual misconduct by teachers or other school employees.

"Kids tell each other," Shakeshaft said, "but they don't tell adults."

State educators acknowledge that they don't really know how prevalent the problem is in the 55 counties. Counties sometimes report misbehavior, but often, state officials learn of teachers' actions only when they are arrested and their names appear in the news media, which prompts calls from the public, Huffman said.

"More typically, it is the public," she said.

Although West Virginia is among 17 states that require school districts to report sexual misconduct, schools and counties often do not report rumors or teacher resignations under suspicious circumstances, said Terri Miller, president of Stop Educator Sexual Abuse, Misconduct and Exploitation, a New York-based nonprofit advocacy group.

No single national agency tracks sex-related cases against teachers. And research is limited because schools are reluctant to participate in surveys on the sexual misconduct of their teachers.

The National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education maintains a database of teaching-license revocations to ensure that teachers with records can't easily transfer to another state, but those records are confidential, said Roy Einreinhofer, executive director.

Since 2002, new teachers applying for a West Virginia certification must undergo criminal screenings that include fingerprint checks through the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the State Police. The state's teachers union successfully lobbied to have existing teachers exempted unless a teacher transfers to another county.

Judy Hale, president of the American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia, said the union is "not interested in protecting teachers in the classroom who molest or abuse children, but you have to look at each incident on a case-by-case basis."

"I've spent thousands of dollars defending someone who had a DUI in college 13 years ago, but has had an exemplary record since then," Hale said.

State school board President Lowell Johnson said the board has developed "all the policies it can to protect children."

Yet one parent charges that those policies didn't prevent former Sissonville High band teacher Rodney Newhouse from transferring from Roane County to Kanawha County.

Loretta Baldwin has filed an \$18 million lawsuit against Newhouse and the Roane and Kanawha county school boards over the alleged sexual harassment of her daughter. The Baldwins accuse school officials in Roane County of failing to fire Newhouse after allegations of sexual misconduct surfaced there in 1993, and of failing to disclose the allegations to the Kanawha County Board of Education.

Newhouse was charged with four counts of third-degree sexual abuse in Roane County, but three were dismissed and he was acquitted of the fourth.

He is facing trial in Kanawha County on first-degree sexual abuse, sexual abuse by a guardian and attempted second-degree sexual assault charges. He allowed his teaching license to expire in 2003.

"It's mandatory that we send our children to school," Baldwin said, "so it ought to be mandatory that the board of education keep them safe while they're there."

Inadequate tracking of teachers, incomplete criminal-background checks and poor communication allow teachers like Newhouse to move from school to school, Miller said.

"We call that passing the trash," she said. "One bad teacher can molest many, many children."

She points to Edgar W. Friedrichs Jr., who received a life sentence this August in Fayette County for the 1997 death of 12-year-old Jeremy Bell. The 62-year-old former principal already had been convicted of sexually assaulting several

other boys on a camping trip and was in prison, but he had kept his teaching license until 2002.

"Where's the outrage?" Miller asked.

Last July, West Virginia joined a growing number of states with sexual-assault laws covering educators.

House Bill 3098 expanded West Virginia's existing felony offense of sexual exploitation or sexual abuse of a child to include teachers and others who are in a position of trust or authority. The law previously specified only parents, guardians and custodians.

And nonguardian offenders who once faced only misdemeanor charges now can be sentenced to up to 20 years in prison for certain sexual-abuse offenses.

Still, Baldwin cautions that the responsibility ultimately falls to parents.

"Listen to your children," she said. "Most children are not going to lie about something like that."

---

*[Click to Search for Related Stories in our Library](#)*

---

**TALK BACK:** [[WRITE TO THE EDITOR](#)] [[DISCUSS IN THE FORUM](#)]

Print this Story