

SUPPORTING SCHOOL PROFESSIONALS THROUGH THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICY ON CHILD MALTREATMENT

STEFAN C. DOMBROWSKI

Rider University

KAREN L. GISCHLAR

Lehigh University

School professionals, particularly new teachers and principals, are confronted with myriad challenges throughout their day. Recognizing and reporting child maltreatment is one of these challenges. Research suggests that school personnel are in the best position to identify and report maltreatment because they have consistent daily contact with students. However, the Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect indicated that while schools report more cases of child maltreatment than any other institution, 84% of all suspected abuse cases in schools are never reported. Considering these statistics and the deleterious impact of maltreatment, school districts are strongly encouraged to establish a district-wide policy regarding child maltreatment. This paper provides a framework for establishing such a policy, providing an emotionally supportive climate for teachers and school professionals on this difficult yet legally required obligation.

Child abuse and neglect is one of society's most ominous crimes. Maltreatment robs children of dignity and can have adverse consequences for their social, emotional, behavioral, and academic development (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995). As a result of the potentially harmful impact that abuse can have on children, all 50 states have enacted mandatory child abuse reporting laws for school professionals (e.g., principals, teachers, counselors, and psychologists; Meyers, 1986). According to McEvoy (as cited in Bridgeland & Duane, 1996, p. 454) "the failure of school personnel to identify and report suspected cases of abuse and neglect can result in civil and even criminal liability."

Research (e.g., Kesner & Robinson,

2002) suggests that school personnel are in the best position to identify and report abuse and maltreatment because they have consistent daily contact with students. The Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (Sedlak & Broadhurst, as cited in Kesner & Robinson) indicated that schools report more cases of child abuse and neglect than any other institution. However, the same study revealed that 84% of all suspected abuse cases in schools are never reported, making schools simultaneously the largest source of both over- and underreporting of child abuse (Kesner & Robinson). Considering the deleterious impact of maltreatment and the daily contact school professionals have with students, school districts would be

wise to establish a district-wide policy regarding child maltreatment. Such policy would provide an important support for school professionals, especially teachers and principals. Unfortunately, in many places, a district-wide policy is unavailable. Or, if a policy has been instituted, it may not be communicated properly either to school professionals or to the parents of children they serve. In fact, it is conceivable that a culture may even exist where, for instance, mandated reporting of suspected maltreatment is discouraged in order to preserve a false image that such activity does not occur within a particular district.

Mandated reporting laws place school professionals in a position to protect children from the ill effects of maltreatment (Dombrowski, Ahia & McQuillan, 2003). We contend that school professionals should be provided with information and guidance from administrators with respect to laws and policy (Smith, Morrow, & Gray, 1999) and be supported in their mandated reporting efforts. Indeed, all school personnel should receive formal training in child abuse/neglect issues including identifying, referring, and reporting (Dombrowski et al., 2003; Dombrowski, LeMasney, Ahia & Dickson, 2004; Dombrowski & Gischlar, 2005). They also should be knowledgeable about the law (Baxter & Beer, 1990) and district policy, if such exists. The purpose of this paper is to provide school districts with a framework for establishing a policy regarding child abuse and neglect. This will include a description of how to promote a school culture that recognizes the adverse impact of such and that supports school profes-

sionals when taking steps to protect children. A discussion of how to increase collaboration with agencies that are familiar with preventing and/or intervening with child maltreatment also is included. To begin, the paper reviews briefly the adverse developmental outcomes of child abuse and neglect, substantiating the need for an explicit district-wide policy.

Adverse Impact of Child Maltreatment

Broadly defined, child abuse is an act that causes intentional harm or avoidable endangerment to a child under the age of 18-years-old. There are four general categories of child abuse: sexual, physical, emotional, and neglect (Bryant & Milsom, 2005). The educational community may be all too aware of obvious acts of physical and sexual abuse because these crimes often are highlighted in the media. However, the educational community may be less aware of the more prevalent, but equally deleterious, instances of neglect and emotional abuse that do not receive such attention (Dombrowski et al., 2003). The maltreatment literature base, nonetheless, indicates that maltreatment of any subtype disrupts children's academic, cognitive, social, and psychological trajectories (Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996; Kendall-Tackett, Meyer, & Finkelhor, 1993; Oddone, Genuis, & Violato, 2001). Some children may never fully recover from the trauma, resulting in lifelong depression, anxiety, and personality disorders. Other individuals may be predisposed to engage in prostitution, pornography, drug abuse, or crime (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Bryant & Range, 1996; Ferrara, 2002; Malinoskey-Rummell &

Hansen, 1993). Still other children, upon entering adulthood, perpetuate the cycle of abuse within their relationships and even with their own children (Patterson, 2002). The long-term consequences of child maltreatment can be so devastating that it has been called "soul murder" (Shengold, 1989).

Given the adverse consequences of maltreatment, all 50 states have enacted mandated reporting policies (Kalichman, 1999). These policies govern school practices and require school professionals to report maltreatment when it has been reasonably suspected. Unfortunately, the level at which a reasonable suspicion threshold has been met is sometimes difficult to discern. Legislative codes do not specify what entails a reasonable suspicion threshold and there is not a linear relationship between the signs of maltreatment and the occurrence of abuse. Intuitively, it would seem that the greater the number of signs of maltreatment, the greater the probability that maltreatment has occurred; however, one must be cautious about arriving at that conclusion for every instance of abuse. There are individuals who have been maltreated and yet escape any ill-effects (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995).

The ambiguity surrounding mandated reporting might dissuade school professionals from contacting Child Protective Services (CPS) to file a report (Kenny, 2001). Adding to the reluctance in reporting are possible misperceptions. This includes a misunderstanding of mandated reporting laws, a fear of making an inaccurate report, a fear of legal reprisal, a belief that irrefutable evidence is needed, a tacit school culture that discourages

reporting, and a feeling that reporting may result in a betrayal of the relationship with a caregiver (Hinson & Fossey, 2000; Levin, 1983; Shor, 1997). The reluctance to report is unfortunate because of the adverse impact that continued abuse and neglect can have on the development of a child. It contributes to the continued victimization of youth by failing to recognize the risk of further abuse (Gil, 1996). Moreover, failure to report abuse that has been reasonably suspected is illegal and violates many professional ethics codes (Myers, 1986, 1998).

Promotion of a School Climate that is Intolerant of Maltreatment and Supportive of Mandated Reporting

Although school professionals have a clear legal and ethical duty to report suspected child maltreatment, we argue that school administrators (e.g., superintendents and principals) and boards of education could foster a climate that is explicitly supportive of mandated reporting. An explicit, district-wide policy that has been communicated to parents will support teachers and administrators in their legal and ethical requirements to report (Hoy & Miskel, 2001). It also will help to create a psychologically safe environment for school children—one that does not tolerate child maltreatment. Organizational research is clear in indicating that climate can be fostered most readily from those at the top of the organization (Drucker, 1993). This position also is clearly consistent with several of the Standards for School Leadership set forth by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC; Hessel & Holloway, 2002). ISLLC standards require school leaders to promote a

safe learning environment and a school culture in which there is a school to family/community partnership. Moreover, relative to ISLLC standards, Hessel and Holloway assert that school administrators have a responsibility to serve as moral agents and social advocates for students, their families, and the community at large.

Certainly, administrators have a significant influence on the climate of a school. Climate can be defined as the "personality" of the school and it has a major impact on the behavior of individuals within the system (Hoy & Miskel, 2001). It can be conceptualized along a continuum from open to closed, much the same way that individual personality can be defined as open or closed. In an open school climate, the behavior of both teachers and administrators is authentic and mutual respect is evident between parties (Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2003). Conversely, in a system where the climate is closed, administrators generally are viewed as unsupportive, inflexible, and controlling and this can cause teachers to become suspicious and apathetic (Hoy & Miskel). It is plain to see that a closed climate could foster a setting where school personnel would be apprehensive about reporting suspected cases of abuse and neglect for fear of retribution or lack of support from administration.

Climate can create a fabric of support that enables all members of the school community to teach and to learn at optimal levels (Freiberg, 1998). Moreover, studies have revealed one strong underlying theme: an open, healthy school climate depends greatly on the quality of leadership (Norton, 2002). The question then becomes how best can administrators foster a school cli-

mate in which students can learn and teachers feel supported, especially as it pertains to mandated reporting? Since limited data are available on how best to foster a school climate as it pertains to mandated reporting, a recent, but more broad based study regarding school climate, may provide guidance on this important issue. Harris and Lowery (2002) surveyed 123 teachers and identified four ways by which administrators can attempt to build positive school climates: 1) respecting students by treating them equally and fairly; 2) communicating with students and learning more about them as individuals; 3) supporting students by serving as an advocate and by being accessible; and 4) modeling caring behaviors, such as respect (Harris & Lowery). Results of Harris' and Lowery's investigation suggest that the teachers surveyed perceived a positive school climate as one in which administrators had supportive relationships with students. It seems reasonable to assume that these same behaviors are necessary in relationships between the adults (i.e., teachers and principals) in creating a school climate conducive to open communication and respect.

Hoy and Miskel (2001) described four types of school climates: open, engaged, disengaged, and closed. The distinctive features of the open climate are the cooperation and respect that underlie relations between the faculty and the principal and among faculty members. The administrator is viewed as one who listens, supports, and affords teachers freedom to perform duties without a high level of scrutiny. Teachers in this environment generally are cooperative and committed to their work.

The engaged, disengaged, and closed environments, on the other hand, contain elements such as lack of administrative support or high levels of restrictive behaviors that inhibit communication and commitment (Hoy & Miskel). It appears that the open school climate would be the one in which teachers would feel both the support and autonomy necessary to be comfortable in the reporting process. School administrators and boards of education have an urgent responsibility to consider the issues we raise regarding climate, procedural issues, and mandating reporting.

The following recommendations will assist in promoting a safe learning environment that does not tolerate maltreatment. The adoption of our recommendations is consistent with ISLLC standards as well as the spirit of mandated reporting laws.

Explicit Policies for School Professionals. As a first step in fostering a supportive culture, school districts should consider creating a district-wide administrative policy that delineates procedures for school professionals to follow once a report has been filed. This policy is not intended to circumvent the legal requirement to report, but rather to support it. For instance, is there someone within the school district who should be notified once a report has been filed? This might include the principal, who needs to be informed in the event that Child Protective Services (CPS) or law enforcement arrives to question a child. Second, there also should be explicit support from administration that provides the school professional with both discretion and freedom and flexibility to

report. In certain states, such as Pennsylvania, each school appoints a designated mandated reporter, such as the principal, who will contact CPS when maltreatment has been reasonably suspected (23 Pa.C.S. §63, *et seq*). The designated mandated reporter should not serve as a gatekeeper by discounting another school professional's judgment of reasonable suspicion. Instead, the designated reporter should be supportive of school personnel when they seek to file a report. In turn, the designated mandated reporter should be supported at the district level for complying with legal and ethical mandates. Policies set forth by the district, as sanctioned by the board of education, will foster a culture that supports school professionals' efforts at preventing maltreatment.

Notification to Parents. School districts should explicitly communicate to parents the district's position toward maltreatment and the intent to support school professionals' legal and ethical responsibilities to report maltreatment when it has been reasonably suspected. There are three proposed ways to offer this communication. First, a school district could send notification directly to caregivers in the form of a letter. Second, the communication may be posted on a district's web site. Third, the district's position can be furnished in a section of a newsletter published by the district.

Of particular importance is notification of the school professional's mandatory reporting requirement. This requirement should be communicated in the same way that other important school-based information, such as open school night or policies against violence, is communicat-

ed. We argue that explicit notification of mandatory reporting requirements will serve to mitigate feelings of betrayal and guilt following a mandated report. In this way, parents have been given fair notice of the school professional's duty to report. This practice is similar in nature to the practices of mental health professionals who must inform their clients at the beginning of therapy of the obligation to break confidentiality when maltreatment has been reasonably suspected (Koocher & Spiegel, 1990). In the same way that the therapist is afforded a privileged position in society, so is the school professional. With this power differential comes the responsibility to be explicit about professional boundaries, especially mandated reporting. We argue that this is an unrecognized, yet critically important facet of a school system's responsibility.

The communication to parents should contain specific information, including an overview of the state's mandated reporting policies in addition to a statement indicating the school district's intent to comply fully with state mandated reporting regulations (see example letter in the appendix). Second, the communication might contain a paragraph describing the adverse outcomes of child maltreatment, which substantiates the existence of mandatory reporting laws. Third, the letter might furnish information on where parents can obtain support for general parenting issues. For instance, where in the community can a parent find support when feeling overwhelmed with caregiving responsibilities? Most importantly, the letter should not convey an interest in policing a caregiver's

parenting practices, but rather in highlighting the importance of protecting children from the harmful consequences of maltreatment. This will indicate an interest in supporting caregivers' parenting practices and may offset a possible perception that schools function as a quasi-law enforcement agency. On the other hand, the present milieu where immigrant status is being scrutinized adds another layer to the complexity of working with families from diverse backgrounds. In fact, recent legislative initiatives to curtail illegal immigrant presence in the United States might increase apprehension and foster distrust in any agency that works under the auspices of the government (Lynch & Hanson, 1992). This topic transcends the scope of this article, but deserves comment nonetheless.

Increased Collaboration with CPS. The local CPS agency may be helpful in furnishing information regarding parenting practices. CPS could direct the district to appropriate counseling or parenting resources in the community. Further, the local CPS agency could provide in-service workshops to school faculty on the topic of maltreatment or the nuances of mandated reporting. School professionals typically have not had advanced training in this area. In fact, even those who have been specifically trained to provide therapeutic services—mental health professionals—may not fully understand the subtle nuances of maltreatment or mandated reporting (Pope & Feldman-Summers, 1992). Increased collaboration with an outside agency such as CPS will facilitate compliance with man-

dated reporting laws and is consistent with ISLLC standards that recommend school-community agency collaboration (Hessel & Holloway, 2002).

Conclusion

Child maltreatment can adversely affect a child's developmental trajectory. As a result, mandated reporting laws have been established for the protection of children. School systems would be well served to foster a culture and generate a policy that increases awareness of the ill effects of maltreatment and that supports mandated child abuse reporting. This mandated reporting requirement should be clearly communicated to parents and legal guardians so that feelings of betrayal following a report can be mitigated. This communication also should be communicated in the same way that other important information is communicated to parents or legal guardians. For instance, a letter could be sent to parents of the district explaining the nuances of maltreatment and the position of the school system regarding maltreatment. Communication in this fashion would serve to provide explicit support to school professionals during the difficult task of contacting CPS to report suspicion of maltreatment. This "informed consent" approach of the school district is akin to that used by counseling professionals (Dombrowski, 2003). Mental health professionals recognize the inherent power differential in the client-therapist relationship and explain prior to the beginning of therapy the limits to confidentiality. Parents of children in the district also should be duly informed of

the school district's requirement to report.

Finally, school systems and outside agencies familiar with child maltreatment should increase collaboration. For instance, CPS might be contacted to provide in-service discussion of maltreatment or parenting information for parents who feel overwhelmed. The protection of children from maltreatment should be given highest priority and the requirement to report reasonable suspicion of abuse should not be taken lightly or discouraged. The consequences to children and society are too great to overlook. A district-wide policy that recognizes the ill effects of maltreatment and supports the school professional's requirement to report suspected abuse will serve to protect children from one of society's most insidious crimes. It also is consistent with the ISLLC charge to establish safe learning environments for children and learning environments where there is increased collaboration between the schools and the community (Hessel & Holloway, 2002).

Appendix

SAMPLE LETTER

Safe Town School District
Anywhere, USA

Dear Parent/Legal Guardian:

The Safe Town School District is concerned about children's emotional, behavioral, academic, and physical development and is providing resources to parents who might feel overwhelmed with their parenting responsibilities. The following organizations or agencies have committed to furnish additional information to parents in a confidential manner.

Children's Trauma Treatment
215-555-1212

Cartman's Charities
215-555-1213

University of Zims
215-555-1234

Safe House
215-555-1235

Teachers and other school professionals are legally required to contact Child Protective Services (CPS) and report abuse and/or neglect when it has been reasonably suspected. This letter serves to inform you of this legal obligation and provide assurance that the Safe Town School District is interested in promoting the developmental well-being of children rather than policing parenting practices. Again, if you are feeling overwhelmed or if you feel like you need confidential help with any aspect of parenting (e.g., discipline procedures or limit setting), please contact one of the above numbers. These organizations have resources to provide you with assistance.

If you have any questions, please contact [School psychologist or counselor] at (212) 444-1234. This individual will be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Sincerely,

Safe Town School District

References

- Abuse of family 23 Pa.C.S. §63, *et seq*
- Baxter, G. & Beer, J. (1990). Educational needs of school personnel regarding child abuse and/or neglect. *Psychological Reports*, 67, 75-80.
- Bridgeland, W. M. & Duane, E. A. (1996). Child abuse policy arenas in Ontario and Michigan: The school. *Education*, 116, 454-464.
- Browne, A., and Finkelhor, D. (1986). Impact of child sexual abuse: A review of the research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 99(1), 66-77.
- Bryant, J. & Milsom, A. (2005). Child abuse reporting by school counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, 9, 63-71.
- Bryant, S. L., & Range, L. M. (1995). Suicidality in college women who were sexually and physically abused and physically punished by parents. *Violence & Victims*, 10, 195-201.
- Cicchetti, D., & Toth, S. L. (1995). A developmental psychopathology perspective on child abuse and neglect. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adult Psychiatry*, 34, 541-65.
- Dombrowski, S. C. (2003). Mandated reporting for mental health professionals: An overview. *Directions in Mental Health Counseling*, 14, 77-88.
- Dombrowski, S. C., & Gischlar, K. L. (2005). Keeping children safe from online sexual victimization. *NASP Communiqué*, 34(2), 16-18.
- Dombrowski, S. C., Ahia, C. E., & McQuillan, K. (2003). Protecting children through mandated child abuse reporting. *The Educational Forum*, 67, 76-85.
- Dombrowski, S. C., LeMasney, J. W., Ahia, C. E., & Dickson, S. A. (2004). Protecting children from online sexual predators: Technological, legal, and psychoeducational considerations. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 35(1), 65-73.
- Drucker, P. F. (1993). *The practice of management*. (New York: HarperBusiness).
- Ferrara, F. F. (2002) *Childhood sexual abuse: Developmental effects across the lifespan*. (Pacific Grove, Calif.: Brooks/Cole).
- Freiberg, H. J. (1998). Measuring school climate: Let me count the ways. *Educational Leadership*, 56, 22-26.
- Gil, E. (1996). *Treating abused adolescents*. (New York: Guilford).
- Harris, S. L. & Lowery, S. (2002). A view from the classroom. *Educational Leadership*, 59, 64-65.
- Hessel, K. & Holloway, J. (2002). *A framework for school leaders: Linking the ISLLC standards to practice*. (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service).
- Hoy, W. K. & Miskel, C. G. (2001). *Educational administration: Theory, research, and practice* (6th Edition). (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill).
- Hoy, W. K., Smith, P. A., & Sweetland, S. R. (2003). The development of the organizational climate index for high schools: Its measure and relationship to faculty trust. *High School Journal*, 86, 38-49.
- Hinson, J., & Fossey, R. (2000). Child abuse: What teachers in the '90s know, think, and do. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 5, 251-266.
- Kalichman, S. C. (1999). *Mandated reporting of suspected child abuse: Ethics, law & Policy* (2nd Edition). (Washington D. C.: American Psychological Association)
- Kendall-Tackett, K. A., & Eckenrode, J. (1996). The effects of neglect on academic achievement and disciplinary problems: A developmental perspective. *Child Abuse & Neglect: The International Journal*, 20, 161-169.
- Kendall-Tackett, K. A., Meyer, L. W., & Finkelhor, D. (1993). Impact of sexual abuse on children: A review and synthesis of recent empirical studies. *Psychological Bulletin*, 113, 164-80.
- Kenny, M. C. (2001). Child abuse reporting: Teachers' perceived deterrents. *Child Abuse & Neglect: The International Journal*, 25, 81-92.

- Kesner, J. E. & Robinson, M. (2002). Teachers as mandated reporters of child maltreatment: Comparison with legal, medical, and social services reporters. *Children & Schools, 24*, 222-231.
- Levin, P. G. (1983). Teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and reporting of child abuse/neglect. *Child Welfare League of America, 62*, 14-20.
- Lynch, E. W. & Hanson, M. J. (1992). *Developing cross-cultural competence: A guide for working with young children and their families*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Malinosky-Rummell, R., & Hansen, D. J. (1993). Long-term consequences of childhood physical abuse. *Psychological Bulletin, 114*, 68-79.
- Myers, J. E. B. (1986). A survey of child abuse reporting laws. *Journal of Juvenile Law, 10*, 1-72.
- Myers, J. E. B. (1998). *Legal issues in child abuse and neglect practice (2nd Edition)*. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage).
- Norton, M. S. (2002). Let's keep our quality school principals on the job. *High School Journal, 86*, 50-56.
- Oddone, E., Genuis, M. L., & Violato, C. (2001). A meta-analysis of the published research on the effects of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Psychology, 135*, 17-36.
- Patterson, G. R. (2002). The early development of coercive family process. In *Antisocial behavior in children and adolescents: A developmental analysis and model for intervention*, ed. J. B. Reid and G. R. Patterson, 25-44. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association).
- Pope, K. S., & Feldman-Summers, S. (1992). National survey of psychologists' sexual and physical abuse history and their evaluation of training and competence in these areas. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 23*, 353-361.
- Shengold, L. (1989). *Soul murder: The effects childhood abuse and deprivation*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
- Shor, R. (1997). Identification and reporting of maltreated children by teachers in Israel. *Early Child Development & Care, 134*, 61-73.
- Smith, A. E., Morrow, J. E., & Gray, D. L. (1999). Principals educate beginning teachers about the law. *Education, 120*, 60.

Copyright of Education is the property of Project Innovation, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.