Recent investigations by schools have uncovered decades of educator sexual abuse involving scores of victims. Some school leaders were uninformed about the allegations regarding incidents on their campuses, while others neglected to act. This failure of leadership oversight has many heads of school and trustees wondering how to safeguard their communities from similar tragedies. Here are key questions these school leaders should ask and suggestions for creating a culture of prevention and reporting.

**Have we established clear expectations for receiving sexual misconduct reports and conducting investigations?**

Heads of school and boards are sometimes held accountable for issues of serial sexual assault despite being unaware of the allegations. Accordingly, they must become actively engaged and require updates on allegations. Unless identified as the accused, the head of school should oversee the handling of all educator sexual abuse allegations. It is the head of school’s responsibility to communicate with the board chair and legal counsel about developments in the investigation and decisions under consideration. Together the head of school and board chair provide periodic updates to the board about the ongoing status of the situation and, ultimately, the conclusions reached. They should also establish clear guidelines for regular updates about critical inquiries such as allegations involving more than one victim, more than one allegation against the same respondent, patterns of inappropriate behavior from related groups, or allegations involving individuals in positions of power.

**Have we articulated our expectation that policies are followed?**

Upholding the administrative structure for reporting, investigating, and disciplining is an important part of the head of school’s role. The head of school must set the tone for thorough compliance with policies. All employees should be held accountable when they fail to abide by the policies and expectations for behavior and reporting obligations.
Be intentional with words and actions.

Am I speaking out to foster a safe and inclusive environment?
To effectively shape your school’s culture, the head of school’s actions should include a no-tolerance philosophy for sexual abuse and strong support for reporting. By publicly voicing support for survivors and proactively addressing topics surrounding sexual abuse, the head of school can serve as a catalyst for cultural change. If the community learns to be alert and report all boundary violations, this may stop or deter predators from further abuse.

Understand school culture.

What trainings are offered for students and employees?
Take a close look at the trainings used for various audiences of your school community. Review the topics and training styles, then assess whether they are appropriate for each group. Are the trainings mandatory? How often are they required? Consider that many of the standard trainings (e.g. workplace harassment training for employees or sexual misconduct prevention training for students) may not cover important topics such as boundary violations, grooming behavior, child abuse red flags, and employee obligations to report incidents of suspected sexual abuse.

Employees charged with responding to sexual abuse allegations should receive training to handle such complaints. If those responsible do not have adequate experience, the school should consult with outside professionals, often their legal counsel, for guidance on how to proceed when a situation involved sexual abuse arises.

Which staff members are addressing issues of sexual abuse?
Heads of school must make sure they are fully aware of which administrators are working to prevent sexual abuse and assist victims on campus. By developing relationships with staff who handle sexual abuse reports and manage prevention efforts, the head of school can also establish an expectation that he or she be informed of noteworthy events.

What resources do we have for victims?
Providing appropriate, easily accessible resources is critical for survivors’ wellbeing. Review whether your school’s resources adequately serve the physical and emotional needs of survivors and whether referrals to off-campus resources are provided. Assisting a survivor by providing educational accommodations such as allowing a leave of absence, absence from class or test taking, or extra time for completing assignments could be critical to helping the survivor. The school’s commitment to survivor wellness helps foster an environment that encourages reporting and supports those who make reports.

When did we conduct our last school climate survey measuring sexual violence attitudes and prevalence, and what were the results?
School leaders must steer school culture toward an ethos that is alert about red flags, facilitates reporting, and supports victims. To do this, the head of school and trustees must understand the current landscape. A school climate survey is an anonymous survey of students that assesses the prevalence of prohibited conduct, including sexual assault and abuse, and provides insight into students’ perceptions about the school environment. If your school chooses to conduct a climate survey, work with experienced professionals to develop appropriate questions and methodology. Even without a climate survey, encourage employees to continually monitor the school climate and promptly report concerns.
Become informed about policies and procedures.

What are the parameters of our sexual abuse policies?
Heads of school should be well versed in their school’s policies addressing educator sexual misconduct and abuse. Pay particular attention to your school’s expectations for healthy interactions with students; reporting requirements, such as the duty to report under state and federal law; and consequences for failing to report suspected misconduct. Review the prohibition against retaliation to ensure it covers anyone who raises concerns about abuse or participates in an investigation into such behavior.

Confirm that the policies require all reports to be investigated and adjudicated using consistent procedures. Strict compliance is important, because any exceptions can lead to predators avoiding accountability despite allegations against them. For example, investigations should not stop simply because the respondent denies the action or because someone powerful requests that the investigation cease.

Do the school’s sexual abuse standards and policies apply equally to employees at all levels?
Consider whether the policies cover all members of the community. For example, are teachers, staff, volunteers, and contractors included? If so, assess how the policies are conveyed to them and whether signed acknowledgments are required to show they have read the policies.

The school’s standards and policies must be applied impartially and consistently, without exception. This includes departments such as athletics, whose student athletes and staff are sometimes excused from following institutional requirements. It is important that exceptions are not made in policy or practice, even for venerated employees or those who bring profit or prestige to the school, such as administrators, board members, and coaches. Remind staff that preventing harm to students and the school community is always the top priority, even if it comes at a cost to the school’s reputation.

What are our school’s options for reporting sexual abuse?
Easily accessible reporting options are an important indicator of a school that encourages reporting. Check whether reporting channels are well publicized, easy to find on the school’s website, and include an anonymous reporting channel, if possible. Ensure the reporting policies designate a member of the board to receive any allegations of abuse when the complainant is uncomfortable reporting to an administrator. Place the board member’s contact information on the reporting webpage.

What are the processes through which reports of sexual abuse are handled?
Review how reports are handled at the school, including which office or individual processes the reports and launches the investigation. Ensure the reporting processes follow the policies laid out in your handbook. Even when a team is managing the investigation and response, if possible, give one staff member oversight of all reports so trends and repeat offenders are identified, or establish a process that looks for these patterns.

Inquire about the school’s procedures for notifying administrators and consulting with the board chair. All allegations of employee sexual misconduct should be brought to the attention of the head of school as soon as possible, who can inform the chair of the board and consult with legal counsel.
Become informed about policies and procedures.

Review the school’s policies for notifying external law enforcement and social services when victims are minors. Ensure policies comply with state and federal mandatory reporter laws. Often there is a mandatory duty to report to the state child protection agency but not a mandatory duty to report to the police. With guidance from legal counsel, schools should consider requiring police notification even when there is not a mandatory duty to do so.

What is our policy regarding background checks?

Increasingly, educational institutions are implementing processes that require background checks of all employees at hire to screen for individuals with red flags in their pasts. Review your school’s policy regarding which positions or groups are subject to background checks, and what those checks entail. Application and interview questions that inquire into past history can reveal conduct that may not otherwise appear on a background check. Keep in mind that phone calls to references—with fine-tuned questions that ask about the individual’s respect for boundaries in interactions with students and children—are often the best source of information to weed out possible predators.

Take note of whether teachers, coaches, volunteers, and contractors are subject to the same screening as regular employees. Consider whether some employees, depending on job function, should have their background checks updated routinely during employment.

Conclusion

Heads of school and trustees play an important role in protecting the school community from sexual predators and should be well versed in the school’s policies, procedures, reporting options, training programs, victim resources, and the administrative roles responsible for implementing these measures. Leaders who have a deep understanding of the school’s culture and engage in vocal support for reporting will help create an environment in which predatory behavior is unwelcome and boundary violations of any kind are not tolerated.

Other Resources

UE’s Educator Sexual Misconduct at K-12 Schools training tools include a checklist series for tips and best practices, a learning program to train employees who work with minors, and UE’s claims study on educator sexual misconduct claims.

For more information and on establishing a comprehensive risk management program to protect children from sexual misconduct, read UE’s Educator Sexual Misconduct Policy and Audit Guide.

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