

Feature

MCPS Implements New Child Abuse and Neglect Policy

All B-CC employees trained on new protocol; Advocates express concern of perceived “knee-jerk reaction” to last school year’s highly-publicized incidents of abuse.

By HANNAH ROBINSON

The headlines said it all:

“Alleged middle school ‘butt grabber’ worked in 58 MCPS schools; arrest record includes previous sexual assaults.” “Teacher’s aide in Montgomery County charged with sexual abuse of minor.” “Music teacher who sexually abused more than a dozen girls pleads guilty.”

Those stories, reported last school year by The Washington Post and ABC News, were among a series of highly publicized arrests involving Montgomery County Public School employees or contractors charged with sexually abusing students.

Now the county school system has reacted, adopting a new policy designed to improve reporting of suspected cases of child abuse, and ensure that they are investigated by law enforcement and not schools themselves. The policy, which was last updated in 1989, includes a first-ever Employee Code of Conduct, featuring specific examples of inappropriate behavior on the part of employees towards students.

The Child Abuse and Neglect policy, which the Montgomery County Board of Education unanimously approved in June, has been criticized by community advocates and child abuse experts who feel it is too vague. They have specific concerns about who is in charge of making sure the policy is enforced, how the county will afford the education initiatives and background checks, and how the policy will be put into place.

According to a February WUSA9 report, more than 20 MCPS employees or contract workers have been investigated for child abuse and exploitation since 2011. In late August, former elementary and middle school music teacher Lawrence Joynes was convicted of sexually abusing 14 students in his 27 years teaching. He was

sentenced to 40 years in prison.

High-profile cases like Joynes’s, as well as the news broken by Andrea McCarren of WUSA9 that MCPS has a confidential database of employees who have displayed “inappropriate or suspicious behavior” have sparked community outcries, and spurred MCPS to address the issue of child abuse by creating a policy workgroup in the fall of 2014.

Jennifer Alvaro, an expert on sexual abuse and an MCPS parent, expressed anger that the county only began to make changes once the media coverage intensified. “I’m 100 percent absolutely positive the only reason they’re acting on this is because of the media and the parents, the outcry,” she said in a recent interview with The Tattler.

The policy requires all county employees to receive in-person and online training on how to properly handle cases of suspected child abuse, and clearly states that employees who do not report abuse risk losing their jobs. “Prior to making a report to [Child Protective Services], it is not the role of any MCPS employee, contractor, or volunteer to investigate or determine the validity of a case of suspected abuse and/or neglect,” the policy states.

The policy also will also focus on educating students through the county’s health curriculum, and providing educational workshops for parents and other community members.

But for Alvaro, the policy does

not go far enough. She says she has “very serious concerns about the policy as it stands,” adding, “I remain concerned that without proper infrastructure, it’s highly likely to all fall apart.”

Alvaro began advocating for changes in the county’s child-abuse policy four years ago when she learned that students weren’t being educated on issues of abuse. She is a social worker who has had a wide range of experience in the areas of abuse, including victim support, education for prevention, and counseling convicted sex offenders.

As a result of Alvaro’s efforts, in the fall of 2014 the county established the Child Abuse and Neglect Advisory Group, composed of both community volunteers and county employees. As a member of the workgroup, Alvaro says she often felt frustrated by a lack of transparency and communication between the MCPS staff facilitating the workgroup and the parent volunteers.

When the county solicited public comments on its proposal, another parent advocate, Susan Burkinshaw, echoed Alvaro’s frustration with how the work group operated. In a letter to the Board of Education, she accused the county’s representatives on the task force of “selective transparency,” and complained that they were slow to provide requested documents and updates to the public website.

A major component of the new

policy is the Employee Code of Conduct, which was given to school employees in the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year. The code presents examples of “Do’s and Don’t’s” for interactions with students, and with parents/guardians and the community.

“Do not meet with a student one-on-one in a room with the door locked or the lights off,” the policy states. “Do not engage or attempt to engage in a romantic or sexual relationship with an MCPS student, regardless of the age of the student.”

The Code of Conduct is a “cornerstone for prevention [of child abuse],” Alvaro said. She emphasized that there must be specific rules for employee conduct, so that abuse can be recognized when those rules are broken.

B-CC resource counselor Colleen Desmond, in charge of the policy here, ran a mandatory 30 minute training session for all school employees in August. All MCPS employees also are required to complete a 1-hour online course by the end of September.

But the biggest change school staff faces is that complaints are no longer handled “in-house.” Says Desmond: “In the past it seemed like the person who was suspicious might talk to the counselor or administrator, but now they are mandated to report it right away [to Child Protective Services],” Ms. Desmond said.

For Alvaro, and other advocates who work to protect children, the details and potential for success of the policy carries immense importance because they understand that a good policy can prevent abuse.

Referring to the heartbreaking written-testimony given by a victim of abuse in the Joynes case, Alvaro suggested that a better policy could have spared the victim. “It’s concrete,” she said. “We could prevented this.”

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Editorials

Dr. Jones: Let’s Follow Guidelines, Not Students (on Twitter)

STAFF

Ever since Dr. Donna Redmond Jones’ arrival, her presence has been felt both in school and online, where she tweets frequently from her account, @BCCPrin.

Social media has become a fixture of our everyday lives, and teachers and school organizations are using increasingly Twitter as a tool to disseminate information quickly and effectively to students. As with all communications between teachers and students, there is a grey area between the lines of professional and inappropriate. Many teachers, including Mr. Tim Gilmore and Ms. Sarah Mahoney (some of the first teachers to use Twitter as a classroom tool), abide by the unspoken rule that “students can follow teachers, but teachers shouldn’t reciprocate the follow.” This allows students to access their teachers’ information outside of a class, which can be very helpful, but it prevents the teacher from seeing a student’s personal tweets.

Initially, it seemed as if Dr. Jones was following precedent. However, in recent weeks, the new principal has

begun following students, and in the process has caused discomfort among many who feel that this is an invasion of privacy. Many students responded by blocking her from seeing their tweets. This presents an ethical dilemma: is it appropriate for a teacher or school employee to follow a student’s personal Twitter account?

In the newly-created MCPS Employee Code of Conduct, it states, “Do not use personal email accounts, social media networking sites, or other electronic communications to communicate or become ‘friends’ with students.” While we are unsure of whether or not Dr. Jones’ recent actions break this rule—her Twitter account is not technically her personal account—we are sure that this puts students in an awkward position.

In an educational setting, it is important for teachers and administrators to acknowledge the inherent power dynamic that exists between them and their students. When an authority figure follows a student on social media, the student is put in a lose-lose situation. Either they block the teacher/administrator, which creates an

awkward wall between the two and prevents the student from viewing the teacher or administrator’s tweets to use as an educational resource in the future, or they feel the need to censor themselves.

It is the responsibility of teachers and administrators to know the appropriate boundaries between themselves and their students, and to focus on what’s happening in school, not online.

Donna Redmond Jones
@BCCPrin
Proud principal of Bethesda-Chevy Chase HS...home to 2,000 students & 191 staff members.
Bethesda, MD
montgomeryschoolsmd.org/schools/bcchs
212 FOLLOWING 430 FOLLOWERS
Tweets Media Favorites

What Will Follow

By DR. DONNA REDMOND JONES

Students are so much more than classroom-based assessment takers, project creators and discussion generators. Students are activists, actors, athletes and journalists. Twitter is one mode of celebrating the wide array of excellence at B-CC.

Yet what was meant to applaud students’ efforts and forge stronger relationships with them has instead rattled a few. Any distress caused was unintended.

The point is well taken. The tone and content of what one might share in a circle of friends could differ from what one might share with his or her principal.

So, as the unspoken rule is now made transparent, students can take comfort in what will follow. Reciprocal following has been reversed and will be limited to student leadership and organizations.

However, beware of an illusion that privacy exists when one tweets to hundreds of followers who in turn re-tweet to thousands. The boldness barons assert on social media must be matched by the courage to engage face-to-face.