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To cite this article: Billie-Jo Grant & Walter Heinecke (2019): K–12 School Employee Sexual Abuse and Misconduct: An Examination of Policy Effectiveness, Journal of Child Sexual Abuse

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2019.1580328>



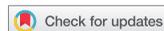
Published online: 27 Feb 2019.



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K–12 School Employee Sexual Abuse and Misconduct: An Examination of Policy Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

Despite federal and state laws and policies aimed at preventing sexual misconduct by school employees, one in ten American students will experience sexual abuse or misconduct at the hands of a K-12 school employee. To explore why such sexual misconduct continues to occur, this study examined the effectiveness of education policies by investigating whether and how school employees understand these policies, how they are implemented, and how loopholes may undermine their intent. This qualitative case study was conducted in three Virginia school districts and included 46 semi-structured interviews with school district employees and county, state, and federal government employees associated with cases of school employee sexual misconduct, and extensive document analysis of school policies and procedures, laws, and court records. Analyses revealed an absence of policy implementation, demonstrated most seriously by a lack of awareness and understanding of policies among school employees, underreporting, and ineffective data collection. The study also identified a number of loopholes in the implementation of policies, resulting from a mismanaged intergovernmental system. The analysis suggests that understanding and implementation of policies meant to prevent sexual misconduct by school employees are fragmented; this fragmentation may be contributing to the continued prevalence of sexual misconduct by school employees.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 September 2017

Revised 1 February 2019

Accepted 1 February 2019

KEYWORDS

School employee sexual misconduct; educator sexual abuse; sexual abuse; student safety; education policy; intergovernmental system; symbolic interactionism

Sexual misconduct by school employees is a serious issue in American kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12) schools. To date, the best estimate, based on student reporting, is that one in ten American students will experience sexual misconduct by a school employee by the time they graduate from high school (Shakeshaft, 2004).¹ The term “school employee sexual misconduct” includes both sexual abuse (i.e. contact or criminal violations) and sexual misconduct (non-contact or ethical violations) by any K–12 school employee (teacher, coach, administrator, volunteer, staff member); the most frequently listed crimes are sexual assault, sexual abuse, rape, sodomy, and pornography (Henschel &

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Grant, 2018; Shakeshaft, 2013). Like any sexual abuse by an adult, school employee sexual misconduct can have lifelong repercussions for students, including negative psychological, physical, academic, and behavioral outcomes (Chen et al., 2010; Dube et al., 2003; Monnat & Chandler, 2015; Noll, Trickett, & Putnam, 2003; Ratliff, Watson, & Hall, 2017).

Both federal and state governments have recognized the seriousness of school employee sexual misconduct and have developed laws and policies to prevent it. At the federal level, Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 prohibits sexual discrimination and sexual harassment in all public and private educational institutions that receive federal funds and requires that institutions act to prevent and respond to sexual misconduct by school employees. Under Title IX, school districts are responsible for prohibiting and responding effectively to sexual harassment and ignoring or improperly responding to the sexual harassment of students by staff or other students has legal consequences. The Department of Education and the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) have developed guidance for preventing school employee sexual misconduct based on Title IX; that guidance suggests that an effective program of action includes 1) clear policies and procedures, 2) prevention practices, 3) training for staff, students, and parents, 4) a requirement for immediate reporting to child welfare and criminal justice agencies, 5) thorough investigatory processes, and 6) an effective response in the event sexual misconduct occurs (Office for Civil Rights [OCR], 1997, OCR, 2001, OCR, 2008). Most states also require school districts to implement various school employee sexual misconduct policy and prevention requirements (i.e. mandatory reporting laws and background check requirements) although the age of consent varies by state (Park, 2003). In most instances, however, the implementation of those policies is left to the discretion of the myriad localities and accountability is limited.

Despite laws and policies prohibiting the sexual harassment or abuse of students by school personnel, there are a number of ways that school employees with histories of sexual misconduct continue to be hired and retained by school districts, putting students at risk. First, school staff may lack knowledge and awareness about school employee sexual misconduct, resulting in being ill-equipped to recognize cases or properly report them to child welfare and law enforcement agencies (Grant, Wilkerson, Pelton, Cosby, & Henschel, 2017; Grant, 2010 & 2011; McKee, 2017; Kenny, 2001; Shakeshaft, 2004; Shakeshaft & Cohan, 1995). Second, background checks may be non-existent in some states and insufficient in others because there is no national, searchable database to manage and track reported incidents (Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2014). Third, due to shame, embarrassment and fear of retaliation and to avoid a potentially high profile criminal case, school administrators may handle cases unofficially allowing an offender to quietly leave a school district without any record of sexual misconduct and seek work in another district (Grant et al., 2017). According to a Government Accountability Office report in

2010, one teacher offender will on average pass through three different districts before being properly reported.

To examine why school employee sexual misconduct continues to occur this study examined the effectiveness of school employee sexual misconduct policies by investigating whether and how school district employees and county, state, and federal government employees associated with cases of school employee sexual misconduct understand the policies, how school and intergovernmental agency employees implement them, and how loopholes in the system may undermine their intent. The article begins with a statement of the problem and a description of the framework, followed by a description of the study methods, results and a discussion of the findings.

The problem

The problem of school employee sexual misconduct is complex, sensitive, and highly contextual; any attempt to address it must address numerous interrelated factors. This study was informed by a review of the research, which revealed four main gaps in attempts to address sexual misconduct against students: 1) lack of awareness, 2) underreporting of incidents of sexual misconduct, 3) a lack of data to drive informed policy decisions, and 4) challenges in defining and studying the issue due to its sensitivity.

Lack of Awareness

While laws and policies have been developed to protect students from school employee sexual misconduct, studies have revealed that school employee sexual misconduct policies and guidance are not consistently implemented, employees are not sufficiently educated on the topic, and many employees are not aware of prescribed procedures (Grant et al., 2017; Grant, 2010, 2011; Shakeshaft & Cohan, 1995). Studies specifically focused on school employee sexual misconduct policy implementation are rare (Grant, 2011; Shakeshaft & Cohan, 1995), but studies on sexual abuse by any adult offer some telling statistics. One study on sexual abuse by any adult found that the majority of the teachers (81%) have no preservice education in sexual abuse prevention (Kenny, 2001). Researchers estimate that the percentage of teachers who are knowledgeable about the signs of abuse and procedures for reporting varies from 3% to 10% (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg, 1995; Kenny, 2001). Title IX guidance requires training for all staff, students, and parents and most states have mandatory reporting laws, but implementation of these federal and state laws is limited by a lack of awareness and training (GAO, 2014). Awareness of what sexual misconduct is, how to recognize it, and how to make a report are essential to properly preventing and responding to school employee sexual misconduct.

Underreporting

Despite mandatory reporting laws, another area that is contributing to the continuation of school employee sexual misconduct is the failure by school employees to properly report incidents. The OCR sexual harassment guidance and mandatory reporting laws implemented in most states require that child welfare agencies or law enforcement personnel be contacted immediately; most laws also define further steps that must be taken by school employees who have evidence of misconduct (Government Accountability Office, 2014). However, educational actors may fail to report incidents for a number of reasons, despite extensive legal and ethical consequences (McKee, 2017; Shakeshaft, 2004). Studies have shown that administrators often fail to report school employee sexual misconduct because they fear legal ramifications and bad publicity (Grant et al., 2017; Grant, 2010, 2011; McKee, 2017; Shakeshaft & Cohan, 1995). As a result, only an estimated 1%–5% of incidents known to school employees are reported to proper authorities, in spite of legal consequences prescribed for failing to report incidents (Corbett, Gentry, & Pearson, 1993; Shakeshaft & Cohan, 1995). Without formal reporting, offending school employees are not held accountable for their actions and school employees with histories of misconduct, free of any public record of their actions, may simply move to other districts and continue working with children.

This pattern of “passing the trash,” where a known sexual predator quietly leaves a school district without a criminal record, provides a short-term solution for a school and the offender’s victims and their families, allowing all to escape the attentions of the media and the court process. But it allows “mobile molesters” to move from district to district, seeking work elsewhere when they’re caught (Shoop, 2004). Both media reporters and researchers have documented a significant number of cases where administrators consciously dealt with incidents in this way, in some cases trading a letter of resignation for a positive letter of recommendation or even paying the offender’s salary for the year in order to get the teacher out of the school quietly (McGlone, 2018; O’Hagan, 2004; Reilly, 2016; Shakeshaft, 2004; Shoop, 2004; Willmsen & O’Hagan, 2003). By allowing repeat offenders to continue to work with children, underreporting becomes a significant building block in the phenomenon of school employee sexual misconduct.

Underreporting may be a product of dysfunction in the overall intergovernmental policy system – the lack of coordination and effective response across multiple agencies. Even when incidents are reported properly to child welfare or criminal justice agencies, gaps in the policy system allow offending employees to walk away from the legal process with clean records (Shakeshaft, 2004). Cases may be resolved in a number of ways, the majority of which do not involve prosecution or a public record (Figure 1). Of cases that are reported, only 1% of teachers will lose their licenses – the remaining 99% of cases will be resolved by

agreements requiring the offenders to leave or subjecting them to minor internal reprimands (Shakeshaft & Cohan, 1995) – and only 1% of school employees will be convicted of sexual offenses – the majority of cases will be plea-bargained down to lesser crimes (Grant, 2010, 2011; Shakeshaft & Cohan, 1995). Without a coordinated effective response by law enforcement and child welfare agencies, school employees are discouraged from reporting.

In addition, national and state databases tracking school employee offenders are nonexistent or not coordinated, making it easier for offenders to be hired in another state and continue to harm students (GAO, 2014). In the rare case of a guilty verdict, the offender will lose his or her teaching license and be entered in state-run databases and sex offender registries. However, in the majority of cases, as Figure 1 illustrates, that is not happening. Further, it can take up to two years for a case to make its way through the courts and license revocation processes – ample time for an offender to find a job in another district (Grant, 2010, 2011).

Lack of Data to Inform Policy Decisions

The dearth of empirical studies on school employee sexual misconduct means policy makers have little access to statistics and prevalence rates that can convince them of needed changes, or track the effectiveness of current policies. A comprehensive study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) in 2004 identified 900 pieces of literature and media reports on the topic, but only 14 were empirical, of which only 4 estimate a prevalence rate in the U.S. population and only 1 was

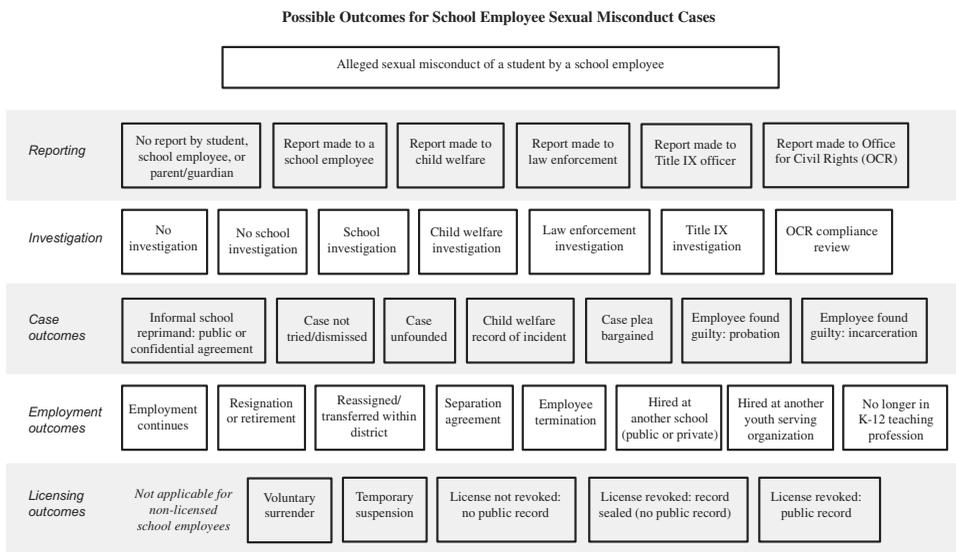


Figure 1. Potential outcomes for cases of school employee sexual misconduct involving a K-12 student.

calculated from a generalizable sample. Those data suggest that an estimated 10% of students will be subjected to school employee sexual misconduct by the time they graduate from high school (Shakeshaft, 2004). More detailed data do not exist because most studies focus on child sexual abuse in general and not specifically on sexual misconduct by school employees (Shakeshaft, 2004).

Furthermore, national surveys conducted by agencies such as the National Center for Education Statistics and the Bureau of Justice Statistics do not ask about school employee sexual misconduct, criminal records are not categorized by profession, child welfare records do not include identifying information, and state Department of Education employees do not provide lists of teachers whose licenses are revoked for sexual misconduct (Shakeshaft, 2004). Moreover, federally funded data sets cannot be aggregated by type of offender. The National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Credentialing (NASDTEC) has made a an effort to collect and document actions taken by teacher regulatory agencies in the United States and some of the Canadian Provinces in a searchable database. However, there are limitations to what is reported in the database and it is not searchable by school employee sexual misconduct specifically. Taken together, these gaps in data mean that rates of school employee sexual misconduct cannot be reliably calculated. The absence of a coordinated and searchable national-level database leaves policy makers and administrators without an essential tool to know whether and how policies are working.

Challenges Related to Sensitivity

One reason for the lack of studies on this problem is the sensitivity of the issue, which constrains research methodology, affects reliability of findings (Dillman, 2007; Lee & Renzetti, 1993), and may be a factor in limited funding for research and difficulties in recruiting study participants. The studies that have been done have relied on a variety of methods, from mailed surveys using yes/no questions to ask about sexual misconduct, to lengthy in-person interviews, to surveys relying on narrow definitions of sexual abuse, have generated a wide range of prevalence rates – from 4% to 43% (Shakeshaft, 2004). The most reliable prevalence data was collected in 2000, nearly 20 years ago (Shakeshaft, 2004). Although methodological and ethical constraints make it difficult, more work is badly needed; solid empirical data is crucial for understanding why, when, where, and how school employee sexual misconduct occurs and identifying changes that will more effectively protect children in our schools.

Framework

The study of school employee sexual misconduct is undertheorized; examining the issue from multiple perspectives may support a deeper understanding, leading to stronger policy development and implementation, better support for intergovernmental systems, and other positive outcomes. To this end, this study analyzes the problem through the lens of a wider theoretical frame of symbolic policy and intergovernmental policy implementation.

Policy implementation literature can be categorized as having been in three historical phases and into three domains: macro, micro and macro-micro implementation (Hall, 1995; Heinecke, 1997; Honig, 2006; McLaughlin, 2006; Rigby, Woulfin, & März, 2016; Werts & Brewer, 2015). Micro implementation examines implementation by policy targets and refers to local agency practice, while macro implementation takes a top-down approach – examining the original intentions of policy makers. The macro-to-micro perspective examines the mutual adaptations that occur as a policy wends its way through the policy process across time and space and refers to the many organizations involved in setting policy, developing administrative regulations, and implementation programs (Honig, 2006; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2016; McLaughlin, 2006; Sabatier, 2015; Young & Lewis, 2015).

Some policy implementation also occurs in the context of the intergovernmental system, made up of the connections among networks of actors and organizations at the federal, state, and local levels, linking the macro and micro policy contexts and activities. Both systems create a network of relationships that relies on many stages of bargaining, negotiation, adaptation, and transformation around policies (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2016; McLaughlin, 2006; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Further, policy implementation and practice are affected by how individuals interpret policies based on their values and beliefs and then act on them in the context of political, institutional, and practical constraints (Bardach, 1977; McLaughlin, 1991, 2006; Smith, Miller-Kahn, Heinecke, & Jarvis, 2004; Spillane & Zeuli, 1999; Young & Lewis, 2015). Researchers argue that multiple levels of interaction and interpretation among policy participants conceptualize the policy process (Fullan, 2007; Spillane et al., 2002; Werts & Brewer, 2015).

Symbolic Policy

Policies are often written ambiguously to allow multiple leaders with diverse interests to align behind a given policy (Lee, 2017; Rosen, 2009; Shore, 2012; Smith et al., 2004). Policies are also purposely made vague so that local actors can adapt them to their unique contexts. Symbolic policy-making can be a mechanism addressing “the discrepancy between operational and political narratives about a social problem” (Slaven & Boswell, 2018, p. 14). However,

without a clearly written and defined policy, it may be difficult to assess the intentions of the policy and hard to hold anyone accountable for its implementation (Stone, 2001).

Even clearly stated policies may not be effective because “words depend on who wrote them and who spoke them” (Edelman, 1988, p. 139). They may also depend on who is reading them (Blumer, 1986). Thus, policies that provide specific definitions and standards for implementation still may be interpreted differently by local actors at each of the multiple levels of the policy system (Wildavsky, 1987). As a result, local actors may or may not intend to implement the policy as the policy maker intended (Blumer, 1986; Spillane et al., 2002; Yanow, 2015). As Bardach (1977) said, “Even the most robust policy – one that is well designed to survive the implementation process – will tend to go awry” (p. 5). Thus, to be effective, a policy must include not only a clear description and definition of its mechanisms and intents, but also a clear standard for successful implementation and evaluation.

Policies that lack an instrument for evaluation are hortatory, or symbolic (Rosen, 2012; Smith et al., 2004). Smith et al. (2004) delineate three types of symbolic policy: failed, ambiguous, and contrary. A failed policy becomes symbolic when it fails to meet the original stated goals. An ambiguous policy is constructed so that it is virtually impossible to judge its effects or debate its values. Finally, Smith et al. (2004) calls contrary policy “unintentionally deleterious”; this is a policy that produces unanticipated effects or effects contrary to the policy’s stated goals.

For school employee sexual sexual misconduct, policies may be “failed” because state departments of education and school districts are not addressing all of the requirements set forth by federal laws and policies. School employee sexual misconduct policies may also be “ambiguous” providing gaps for local schools ineffectively to implement policies or “contrary” resulting in unanticipated effects for school employees and students. Clear rules and secured accountability can help assure measures are being taken to prevent the problem. However, the dilemma of how to measure policy implementation still exists for researchers. Without specific policies from the state, specific actions cannot be measured in local schools and implementation can mean many different things depending on the local district’s policy interpretation. Thus, limits for policy implementation and vague descriptions must be taken into account when evaluating local implementation.

Intergovernmental System

Ambiguity may be increased by the involvement of multiple agencies across and at each level of the policy system, each of which may operate according to its own discretionary interpretation of the policy. The American educational system is by definition an intergovernmental system with several layers (federal, state,

school district, and schools). The intergovernmental system for education policies is generally led by higher levels of government (federal or state) that require lower levels (districts or schools) to make changes to policy and practice (Fowler, 2018; Kirst & Jung, 1986; Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013; McLaughlin, 2006; Spillane et al., 2002). In addition, school employee sexual misconduct policies are managed by multiple agencies (e.g. state departments of education, school districts, schools, child welfare agencies, district attorneys offices, local law enforcement) within an uncoordinated intergovernmental system.

Researchers have shown that policy requirements and responsibilities often are shared between agencies, and interaction between agencies at the various levels is not explicit or well defined (O'Toole, Peters, & Pierre, 2012). Kirst (1995) describes these blurred boundaries as a “marble cake,” a blend of different cakes with no clearly defined boundaries. The incorporation of too many governing agencies creates an unstable system for policy implementation with many severe, unintended consequences. As a result, researchers of intergovernmental systems agree, state education policies are typically characterized by a lack of enforcement, imprecise policy directives, and local variation among initiatives (Fowler, 2018; Kirst, 1995; Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013; Spillane et al., 2002). State and local education policies are not well structured and do not come with support for implementing or sustaining them (Fowler, 2018; Lusi, 1994).

The challenges associated with the intergovernmental system can be managed to increase collaboration among agencies. Researchers suggest that best practices for intergovernmental management involve finding a solution while considering the various substantive, jurisdictional, and political tasks associated with that solution (Agranoff & Lindsay, 1983; Fowler, 2018). In addition, local context and the perceived severity of the problem contributes to the complexity in that “perceptions of the severity of problems and managerial skill explains the level of intergovernmental collaborative activity” by local policy actors (McGuire & Silvia, 2010). Agencies in the interorganizational policy system are more likely to work together if they have a common goal or shared values (Nathan & Mitroff, 1991; van Hoof et al., 2019). Thus, agencies need to discuss ahead of time the intended goals of the policy and embark on a coordinated effort to accomplish goals and respond to events that the agencies independently may not be able to. In this way, agency collaboration can prevent policy responsibilities – and outcomes – from getting lost in the intergovernmental system.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine the intergovernmental system and the implementation of school employee sexual misconduct policies in three districts in the State of Virginia. To that end, it explores several elements of sexual misconduct policy implementation: (1) the extent to which school employee sexual misconduct policies are defined, understood, and implemented by school

district employees and county, state, and federal government employees associated with cases of school employee sexual misconduct, and (2) the nature of responses to reports of abuse in the intergovernmental system. Overall, the goal of the study is to examine the effectiveness of school employee sexual misconduct policies by investigating whether and how school district employees and county, state, and federal government employees associated with cases of school employee sexual misconduct understand the policies, how school and intergovernmental agencies implement them, and how loopholes in the system may undermine their intent.

The methodologic frame of the study engages a multiple case study design, an interpretivist paradigm, and Erickson's (1986) analytic induction. Understanding complex organizations demands a comprehensive examination of local practices; with this in mind, three districts in the State of Virginia were selected for an in-depth analysis of school district employees and county, state, and federal government employees associated with cases of school employee sexual misconduct knowledge of school employee sexual misconduct policies. In order to capture multiple and unique perspectives on policies and practices and ensure more information-rich cases (Patton, 2002), participants from a variety of agencies within the intergovernmental system were targeted via stratified purposeful sampling (see Table 1 for a complete list of participants, $N = 46$).

Intitutional review board approved interview protocols, including both initial questions and follow-up questions, were created based on a review of the literature and the participant's role with regard to school employee sexual misconduct; the protocols were adjusted after an analysis of each district's court and policy documents. Interviews, which were semi-structured, consisted of five parts: 1) understanding of school employee sexual misconduct policies, 2) implementation

Table 1. List of study participants ($N = 46$) by district.

District A	District B	District C	State Actors
Superintendent	Superintendent	Superintendent	DOE Licensure employee
Human Resources Coordinator	Human Resources Coordinator	Human Resources Coordinator	DOE Assessment employee
Commonwealth Attorney	Commonwealth Attorney	Commonwealth Attorney	OCR employee
Court Clerk	Court Clerk	Court Clerk	Lobbyist
CPS Director	CPS Director	CPS Director	Legislator
Sheriff	Sheriff	Sheriff	DOE Evaluator
Principal A1	Principal B1	Principal C1	
Principal A2	Principal B2	Principal C2	
Teacher A1	Teacher B1	Teacher C1	
Teacher A2	Teacher B2	Teacher C2	
Counselor A1	Counselor	Counselor	
Counselor A2	School Psychologist	Administrator	
Social Worker	Special Ed/Title IX Coordinator	School Resource Officer	
Child Advocacy Director			

CPS = Child Protective Services, DOE = Department of Education, OCR = Office of Civil Rights

of the policies in their work setting, 3) understanding of monitoring practices and accountability, 4) policy evaluation practices and protocols, 5) participant's demographic information. Confidential interviews, which lasted 30–45 minutes, were held in a convenient location for the participant or by telephone (the second option was preferred by most participants). The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and notes taken during the interview were summarized.

Qualitative methods for data collection and analysis were triangulated to help promote the validity of the data and analysis (Yin, 1982). Interview data was triangulated with documents regarding district and state policies, court records from more than 100 Virginia court cases, and newspaper articles about school employee sexual misconduct. Extensive analysis of the data was conducted using analytic induction (Erickson, 1986). As the data collection process proceeded, working assertions or themes were developed inductively from the data collected, by reading and rereading the data corpus. All of the data, including interview transcriptions and multiple analytic memos, journals, and notes, was imported into Nvivo, a qualitative software used to formulate themes and organize data. Themes were created based on both confirming and disconfirming evidence. Finally, assertions generated from the data were compared to numeric prevalence rates collected from school, court, and policy documents.

Findings

Data analysis across school district and local and state government entities revealed multiple gaps in policy understanding, implementation, and intergovernmental relationships. The evidence, from interviews and documentary evidence, suggests: (1) school employees are unaware of sexual misconduct policies, (2) there is a lack of reporting or delayed reporting of incidents, (3) system challenges limit the effectiveness of policies, (4) the intergovernmental system is handicapped by competing goals and a lack of collaboration between agencies, (5) both state and district Boards of Education lack the means to evaluate policy effectiveness or enforce accountability.

Lack of Awareness

The majority of interviewees in all three districts demonstrated that both school district employees and county, state, and federal government employees associated with cases of school employee sexual misconduct were consistently unaware of school employee sexual misconduct laws, policies, and procedures. For example, the Superintendent of District A said, “You know, I don’t know. So, if you are trying to judge my awareness, you have found that I am not very aware.” Multiple participants said that written policies and formal prevention efforts were not integrated into policy manuals or procedures. For example:

I have been a principal for ten years and I have never had anybody cover that [school employee sexual misconduct] with me as a principal and never had anyone tell me this is what you need to do with your staff. (District A, Principal)

Instead of acting based on policies, school employees reported a tendency to lean on common sense and informal practices, often justifying such practices with the argument that the district is small and sexual abuse does not happen in those kinds of settings. One participant said:

Well, um, probably I don't know that our policy needs to be changed. Like I said, we have the luxury of being small enough that we operate in some ways on a really nice cultural level with each other. (District B, Teacher 2B)

Despite the fact that all three school districts in the study experienced at least one case of school employee sexual misconduct, interviewees continued to believe that such misconduct is a rare occurrence and policies and procedures were not necessary.

Lack of Reporting

Though interviewees are required by law to report school employee sexual misconduct immediately to child welfare or criminal justice agencies, participants acknowledged underreporting or delayed reporting of incidents (District A, HR Director; District B, HR/Title 9; District C, HR Director; District B, Superintendent; District A, High School Counselor). They reported that victims and school employees are afraid to report because of the stigma, shame, and embarrassment associated with sexual abuse. Participants also reported that school employees are afraid to come forward because of lack of evidence, legal worries, fear of recourse from the offender, and failure to understand what needs to be reported. When cases were reported to school administrators, the situation was complicated by administrators' practice of conducting internal investigations (although they were untrained for that kind of examination) before deciding whether to report the case (District C, Teacher 2C; District C, Principal 1C; District B, Principal 2B). The most important driver of that behavior was the need to protect the student or the school's reputation. Fear of media exposure, for the student and the school, was a significant factor (District A, Principal 1A; District C, Teacher C2; District B, Teacher 1B; 2B; District A, Superintendent; District B, Superintendent; District A, HR Director; District B, HR/Title 9). For example, one administrator said:

I will do a preliminary. I'll get my feet wet and see if there is any validity to it. You know even if there is not, I am still going to have to go through the process if they push the issue. I don't want to be run down a wrong road. Because they are very time-consuming and hurtful. When you start bringing people in and talking with them and all that, you can cause some harm there, so I want to know where I am going pretty much, but then once I start and I do find some credible evidence, then

expand the investigation and then you bring other parties in. They are no fun at all. (District A, HR Director)

Even after a case is reported to law enforcement, the mismanagement continues – interview data show that court clerks in all three districts failed to report convicted teachers to the State Department of Education for revocation of licenses and were unaware of their state reporting requirements.

System Challenges

Information about the everyday practices and participants' understanding of the policies gathered during interviews, point to systematic oversights that contribute to the perseverance of the problem. On one side, gaps are generated by inadequate training and insufficient funding for policy implementation, and on the other side, by improper background checks and a non-existent national database of incidents.

In-depth analysis revealed that the lack of implementation of school employee sexual misconduct policy at the district level can be partially attributed to the absence of assistance from district and state supporting agencies. For instance, multiple participants said that the issue of sexual misconduct had never been addressed in informal or formal training:

You know, we don't have staff development on staff-student sexual abuse. Part of it is that we absolutely take it for granted that people are to do what they are supposed to and not do what they are not supposed to. (District B, Superintendent)

The lack of training led to further problems in case management, as it supported the conviction that dealing with sexual misconduct required only common knowledge and that the school was actually implementing the policy adequately. As one principal said:

No training, you know. But pretty much, I think we are pretty good at it. Dealing with these kids every day, as a principal, the discipline they deal with you know, and it is not all horribly bad, but it is still just things constantly... I say I think we are as good, I say with police officers, I think we are better than they are in questioning and getting this kids to confess. We just sort of get good and so you learn on the job, how do you do that. (District C, Principal 2C)

Participants also cited a lack of funding as a reason for not implementing federal and state school employee sexual misconduct policies. Without the proper assistance from supporting agencies, participants said, the school system was unable to develop the capacity to respond appropriately to school employee sexual misconduct.

Larger systemic issues further contribute to keeping the education system easily accessible to sexual offenders, including limited options for background checks and short criminal sentences for sexual offenses. The current system

allows even a convicted offender to easily conceal information about his or her criminal record and previous employment and get hired again, in another district. For instance, child welfare records are only searchable by state, records are confidential, and the search can take a considerable amount of time (45--60 days) to complete. Even diligent districts can fail to complete that kind of search in every state for every employee. As one participant said:

We do CPS, we do criminal background checks and thorough reference checks. I mean, I am diligent on that. And people still slip through the cracks like this guy. And he was as nice as he could be. (District A, HR Director)

Examination of our criminal practices on children's sexual abuse reveals further possible gaps offenders can exploit. For a number of relevant offenses, no minimum sentence is prescribed, and the range for sentencing can be fairly wide. Plea bargaining means that a significant number of convicted offenders never serve any jail time and they may not even be required to register in the sex offenders' database. Ultimately, the lack of convictions also contributes to the lack of data, as those offenders whose cases are dismissed or charged with lesser or different crimes are not included in prevalence data.

Intergovernmental System Issues

Interview data and qualitative analysis of policies and court cases offer a picture of an intergovernmental policy system that is uncoordinated and unregulated. Numerous agencies and the actors in them, all having shared but limited responsibility and no accountability, have created a dysfunctional intergovernmental system with two primary problems: (1) actors in each agency can easily ascribe blame for failures to other agencies in the system, and (2) the nature of the system makes it very difficult for agencies to work together in a coordinated fashion. Instead of providing effective avenues for dealing with school employee sexual misconduct, the system is, for many study participants, part of the problem. A school counselor said:

I'm not always happy with what I get from Department of Social Services, sometimes they are a little slow, and the child has to be bleeding out on the floor to get a response sometimes. But you know that is the protocol. (District A, Counselor)

This problem begins with the fragmented records described elsewhere. State crime registries and child welfare records are difficult to access across jurisdictions, as are lists that track school employees whose teaching licenses have been revoked. Further, the various lists may be incomplete; 34 teachers in the state of Virginia who were convicted of sex offenses and listed on the sex offender registry were not on the National Clearinghouse Database maintained by the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification.

The license revocation process is lengthy – of the 103 cases collected from 2000–2010, it took an average of 583 days for a convicted teacher’s license to be revoked by the Virginia State Department of Education. As a result, a teacher was able to get hired in District B despite having a conviction in one district and a pending investigation in another. The District B Superintendent said:

Yeah, he was founded of abuse in [name redacted] county, and then hired in [name redacted], where he abused two more girls. We had no idea about the pending investigation and nothing came up on the background check.

Evaluation and Accountability

The lack of awareness among interviewees was fed by the fact that state and district administrators do not conduct evaluations of policies, largely because there are no state requirements to do so. Some participants suggested that a lack of support and funding lay at the root of this issue. A state Department of Education staff member said:

I wish we had the capacity to do that kind of research, but unfortunately we just don’t have the staff resources to do the research and evaluation we’d like to do. (State DOE member, #3)

Further, there is no mechanism for collecting and assessing information on policy effectiveness and problem dimensions. Interviewees recognized that this failure to deal with the problem at the government level is a factor in its pervasiveness. One teacher told the interviewer:

There has to be something from higher up, the governor or the secretary of education or something that says that we will not permit this, we will not excuse it and we will not turn a blind eye to it. This can’t happen. But it seems like when it comes to things in school, we try to keep quiet so we don’t disturb the community and don’t give any bad feedback and all this and it is just not right. What grows in the dark – mold, fungus. I think anytime that you reduce your transparency, things happen. They happen in shadows, and it is not good. (District C, Teacher 2C)

Discussion

Previous studies highlighted many conflicting points in federal, state, and local policies on school employee sexual misconduct, which allowed for different interpretation of policies by different actors (Bardach, 1977; Rein, 1976), seriously hampering policy implementation. The absence of an evaluation process for these policies directly contributes to low awareness of the problem, a gap exacerbated by political and cultural barriers that support silence on the issue (Young & Lewis, 2015). In other words, school employee sexual misconduct policies are another example of a failed intergovernmental system.

This study reinforced those insights and showed how intergovernmental failures translate to failure to address the problem on the ground. It did so by showing how gaps in policy implementation and a lack of communication among the agencies responsible for it leave students vulnerable.

The most serious failure of the system is the numerous gaps that enable sexual predators to enter the classroom and abuse children – even after they are convicted. This study identified a number of such gaps, presented in [Figure 2](#). Molesters can be expected to continue to abuse until they are apprehended (Pryor, 1996); they will continue to exploit gaps in the system until they are caught. Closing that gap, and barring molesters from schools before they can offend again, will require a much more cohesive intergovernmental system, one that records and reports cases in a timely and efficient manner.

Addressing this complex issue will require effective reform on multiple levels. On the policy level, changes should target evaluation, reporting, and employee training; on the culture level, the stigma and taboo around sexual abuse must be challenged. That stigma allows child sexual abuse to remain “the best-kept secret in the world” (Schultz, 2005, p. 15). To prevent such abuse from occurring in schools, both laypersons and professionals must overcome their instinct to manage distress by denial and learn first, to see the problem and then, to increase their competencies to respond to it.

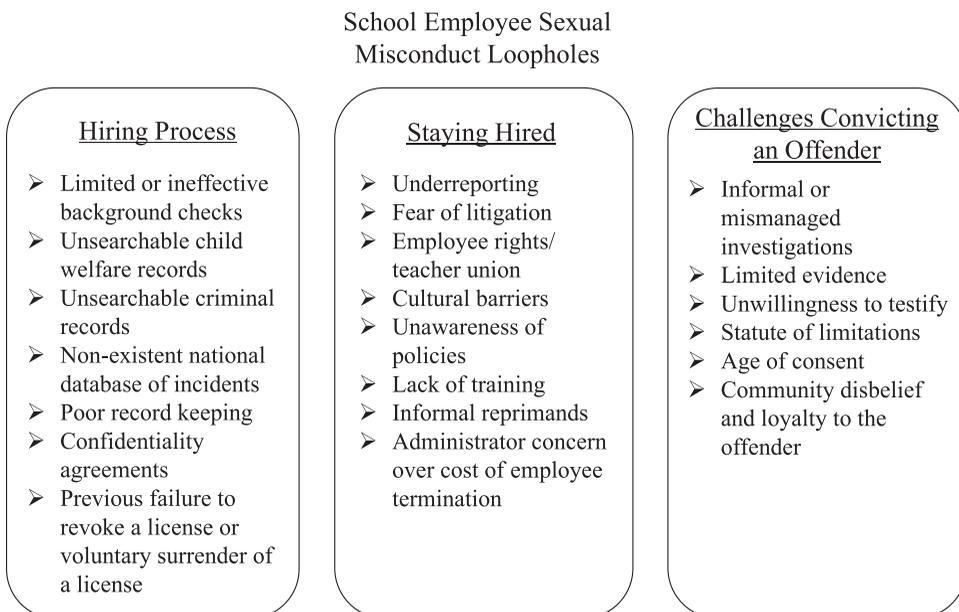


Figure 2. Loopholes that allow offenders to get hired in the educational system, stay hired without consequences, and potentially be rehired.

Implications and limitations

Participants in this study largely did not implement policies, either choosing to ignore their responsibilities or not ever understanding them in the first place. Further, the policies they were charged with implementing came without any mechanism for accountability. Given these facts, policies around school employee sexual misconduct may be symbolic, rather than substantive (Smith et al., 2004). However, they need not remain so. Clear, decisive action to create specific guidance for preventing and responding to cases of school employee sexual misconduct, clearly defined accountability mechanisms for each policy element and stakeholder, and obligatory evaluation processes for policy implementation at all levels would meaningfully contribute to a more effective and comprehensive response.

Apart from professional development and accountability for school employees, community-level awareness must also be addressed. This study revealed that we have a culture of silence around school employee sexual misconduct, one that extends beyond school system actors. Unfortunately, this attitude only perpetuates the problem. Sexual misconduct must be publicly discussed so that everyone is prepared to recognize and respond to it, and to support its victims. Local communities are an important part of the education system, and they must be included in policy implementation that recognizes them as relevant and valuable stakeholders whose systematic engagement could work to prevent sexual abuse in schools.

Systems that allow offenders to move from school to school must also be addressed. A coordinated national database is needed to record all cases of sexual misconduct in schools across the United States, one that is searchable by name and social security number. Currently, the only way to search all state databases for sexual misconduct cases is by fingerprint (Hamilton, 2008). One way to facilitate this (barring the creation of the national database) is for state legislatures to require fingerprinting of all prospective education hires; this is an expensive solution, but currently the only one available to facilitate comprehensive searches.

A national database will also enhance transparency, providing clear answers to questions about who offends, how often, and with what legal consequences. Realistic and useful information like this is the basis for improved decision making by policy makers (Rein, 1976).

Finally, existing resources for preventing, responding to, and investigating school employee sexual misconduct, such as Title IX guidance, are not fully utilized. These documents are a good start for developing training for school personnel to address prohibited behaviors, responsibilities in the case of an incident, and reporting protocols. The tendency of school administrators to conduct investigations should also be managed, either by providing them

proper training in how to do that or by providing training that emphasizes that they are not allowed to conduct investigations.

The main limitation of this study is in the generalizability of its findings due to the small sample size – 3 of 134 Virginia districts – and purposeful sampling method. The small sample size calls for verification by an additional study with a larger sample of districts.

Conclusion

Overall, the problem of school employee sexual misconduct is far from understood. Too many gaps exist that allow offenders to escape prosecution and offend again. Many studies are needed to fight the unintended consequences of interagency failures in preventing, reporting, and investigating sexual misconduct. Despite the sensitivity of the topic, poor funding, and methodological constraints, further research is greatly needed to ensure student safety and create motivation for policy changes.

Note

- 1 Media reports and researchers have documented lists of cases at a local or state level, but these lists represent only the reported cases and their definitions vary. Unfortunately, in the United States there is no federal data collection system to track and analyze the prevalence of school employee sexual misconduct leaving Shakeshaft's reanalysis of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) survey from 2001 as the most recent generalizable student survey.

Disclosure of Interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Standards and Informed Consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation [institutional and national] and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study.

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