

Bay Area News Group reporting prompts calls for mandatory training in identifying and reporting child abuse

By Theresa Harrington

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Nearly a year after Bay Area News Group published a survey of 94 school districts that showed more than half didn't train their employees in spotting and reporting child abuse, state and national leaders are calling for mandatory training.

Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, said last [month](#) that he asked the U.S. Government Accountability Office to survey school districts throughout the nation about their sex abuse reporting policies, in part based on reports he read in this newspaper about abuse of children by school teachers that was not reported to police or Child Protective Services as required by law. Miller stressed that Title IX also requires schools to keep children safe from sexual harassment or abuse.

He was particularly troubled by the fact that teachers in these cases often "groomed" students for abuse by befriending them first, then paying special attention to them outside of school hours. Miller said school employees should be trained to spot grooming behavior and report that to authorities, in order to prevent sexual abuse from occurring.

Last week, state Superintendent Tom Torlakson [announced](#) his support for AB 1432, authored by Assemblyman Mike Gatto, D-Los Angeles, which would require formal training for all school employees on the identification and reporting of suspected child abuse.

"Nothing is more important than the safety of our children at school," Torlakson wrote, in a letter to Gatto. "California has had child abuse reporting laws on the books since 1963 — for more than five decades. And yet, even as changing state laws have expanded the number and nature of 'mandatory reporters,' never have they required any accompanying training in these duties. This does a disservice to both school employees and to the children these laws are meant to protect.

Our efforts to make our schools safer and help prevent crimes against children must also include giving educators and others who work with children the very best training and guidance available.

According to a recent media report, fewer than half of 94 school districts surveyed actually train employees on the identification and reporting of child abuse and neglect. School districts that do not provide training are required — under existing law — to notify the California Department of Education (CDE) of their reasons for doing so. Despite our best efforts to make districts aware of these responsibilities, we have received no such notifications. Clearly, current requirements fall short.

That is why I am pleased to see AB 1432 take a step forward by requiring that all school employees receive training at the beginning of every school year in their legal obligation to

report child abuse and neglect. But it also ensures that the local educational agencies providing this training have assistance, by requiring the CDE, in consultation with the Office of Child Abuse Prevention in the California Department of Social Services, to provide information and guidelines on mandatory reporter training. Importantly, this training would also now be required to include the fact that failure to report constitutes a misdemeanor punishable with jail time and a fine.

Across California, educators and school communities feel a genuine responsibility toward the children they serve — for their education and their safety and well-being. They do not believe their job begins when the bell rings and ends at the schoolyard gate, and they know that we cannot expect a fearful child to learn ...”

The failure of school districts to adequately train employees in identifying and reporting suspected abuse or grooming behavior can have tragic results. In the Mt. Diablo school district, former Woodside Elementary teacher Joseph Martin has been charged with 125 molestation counts involving 13 former students at the Concord school.

Two [lawsuits](#) filed last Tuesday on behalf of nine students allege the abuse could have been prevented if district officials had alerted police or Child Protective Services of suspicions that first came to light in 2005-06.

Here is a Guest Commentary by Carol Carrillo, executive director of the Child Abuse Prevention Council of Contra Costa, regarding the need for better training in schools:
http://www.contracostatimes.com/opinion/ci_25136650/training-is-designed-make-children-safe-from-abuse

She notes that her agency is now offering training in MDUSD. But, back when we did our survey, I e-mailed Julie Braun Martin about this training and she responded that the district’s legal department was pursuing different training. This was before the Martin case came to light. As Carillo states, MDUSD obviously needed a “wake up call” before it was willing to take this training seriously.

Interestingly, Carillo also talks about training for students. Perhaps if MDUSD offered the “Speak Up, Be Safe” program, Woodside students would have spoken up sooner about Martin’s behavior and would have realized that it was wrong.

Do you think the state should require districts to train employees in spotting and reporting abuse?