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Parents outline incidents on buses

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by **Jacqueline Mah**

Staff Writer

Mar. 9, 2005

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Upset with response to sexual encounters

In the wake of a Gazette report on a Germantown incident, three more families have come forward to say that their daughters were the victims in sexual incidents on public school buses. And all three were unhappy with either the school system's or the police's response.

Each of the incidents involved girls age 12 or younger and occurred during the past 12 months.

Their mothers talked with The Gazette following a Feb. 23 article about a Roberto Clemente Middle School seventh-grade girl who was repeatedly groped on her buttocks and chest by two boys on a bus on Feb. 15.

The mother of another Clemente student said her then-12-year-old daughter was also groped by five boys during a bus ride home from school last May

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The mother of a Sally K. Ride Elementary fifth grader said another Clemente boy gave her 10-year-old daughter an explicit, hand-written letter in October that outlined how to perform oral sex. The boy had special arrangements with the administration to ride the elementary bus home with his younger brother.

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And the mother of a girl with Downs Syndrome who attends Cabin John Middle School said her 11-year-old daughter was coerced by a classmate to perform a sexual act on him during a bus ride home in September. The boy also has Downs Syndrome, according to a police report. The incident occurred on a small bus carrying two other students, the bus driver and an adult aide.

According to the parents, none of the bus drivers reported the incidents. The victims or their families said they reported all of them to school officials. The families' names are being withheld to protect the victims' privacy.

Brian Edwards, school system spokesman, said, "Every incident is taken seriously, and every incident is treated as a disciplinary matter at the school. And all the principals work to address the disciplinary issues with student offenders and also work to ensure there's a safe environment for all the kids."

He said he could not confirm that the incidents had happened before press time Tuesday evening. He also could not say whether the bus drivers in each incident were aware of what happened or had reported it.

The mother of the Clemente girl who was groped by five boys last spring said she is not satisfied with how officials handled her daughter's case.

The boys in that case, who were seventh and eighth graders at the time, shoved the girl to the back of the bus and took turns pushing each other onto her and grabbing her chest, the girl's mother said.

"She was screaming, telling them to stop, hitting them back," the mother said.

The bus driver apparently never saw or heard what was going on, the mother said.

The girl, who is now in the eighth grade, said she reported the incident to school administrators the following day. Administrators notified her mother that same day and called the police officer assigned to the school.

The mother said she would have liked a better response from police. She said the officer told her that what happened to her daughter was not serious enough for it to be pursued by the state Department of Juvenile Services as a criminal offense.

The officer's attitude was, "I'll take your information down, but I doubt it will go anywhere other than the school suspending the boys," the mother recalled. "An attitude like that just lets these boys know that it's OK for these boys to walk around and do this."

Ultimately, the mother got another police detective involved, and the case was recommended for transfer to Juvenile Services, she said.

Assistant State's Attorney Debra Grimes, who handles juvenile matters, said the case involves misdemeanor offenses, but said privacy laws prevent her from detailing the specific charges or the status of the case.

Once police submit a case to Juvenile Services, the agency has 25 days to forward it to the state's attorney's office for further action; dealt with it internally or close it.

If a case is forwarded to the state's attorney, Grimes said her office has 30 days to determine whether to move forward with prosecution.

It has been nine months since the mother filed the police report but she has not received word from any officials as to the status.

Clemente Principal Rosalva Rosas did not return phone calls seeking comment.

In the October case, the mother of the fifth grade girl said she found the explicit oral-sex letter and notified administrators both at Sally Ride and Clemente.

She said both schools' administrators at first denied responsibility for the incident and shifted the blame to MCPS Department of Transportation. Officials there blamed the bus driver, the mother said.

Transportation officials would not speak with The Gazette, referring calls to MCPS spokesman Edwards.

The mother said she could not get any information from administrators or the school-assigned police officer about what disciplinary action was being taken against the boy. Citing privacy rules, administrators told her they could only confirm a suspension and that the boy was assigned to another elementary bus.

"We felt Sally Ride should have protected my daughter since she goes there," she said, explaining that she did not think it was appropriate for this middle school student to ride a bus with elementary-aged children.

"Once he's done something like this, in my opinion, he's lost his right to ride the school bus," she said. "Ride a bus with kids his own age."

But the girl's mother said she and her husband were made to feel as though they were making a "mountain out of a molehill" for pursuing it.

After reading The Gazette article, she said, "Now I see there are problems. I wished I had done something and not hushed like they all told me to do."

Sally Ride principal Anne Marie Samm declined comment. And in the sex-act incident at Cabin John Middle School, the mother of the victim said administrators were quick to minimize the situation because it involved two handicapped children.

She said that administrators alternately implied that her daughter had brought the situation upon herself, that the act was consensual and that the boy lacked the judgment to tell right from wrong.

"It was just one excuse after the other," the mother said. "And bottom line, it was said that it was my little girl's fault."

The boy never denied the allegations, she said, nor has he been punished. The girl's mother is also upset that, to her knowledge, the boy's parents never met with administrators.

"They make you feel like you're the only person with a problem and never let you find out there's anyone else out there like this," she said.

She filed a police report and was told by an officer that the boy's actions qualified as a fourth-degree sex offense, but that he would not be able to interview him without consent because he is handicapped. While she said she does not want to see the boy go to jail, she does feel he needs to be taught that what he did is inappropriate.

Cabin John Principal Paulette Smith did not return phone calls from The Gazette.

All of the parents said they wanted more answers and more accountability from the schools, especially on the issue of adult supervision on school buses.

The mother of the Sally Ride student said the school bus is not a well-monitored environment.

"When you've got 50, 60 kids on a bus, and you've got to drive that bus and keep them safe, the bus driver can't pay attention to everything that's going on," she said.

"Especially with as high as the seats are, you can't see what's going on in the seats.

"I don't know if that means we need to start putting an aide on the buses," she added.

"I know Montgomery County is going to say they don't have funding for that."

Edwards said he did not believe there was an overwhelming problem on school buses. He said 96,000 students ride county school buses each day ~ with up to 60 kids per bus.

When an incident does occur, Edwards said it is school policy that bus drivers notify their supervisors via two-way radio, inform the school's principal or take other action, depending on the situation.

"If an incident warrants it, [the solution] may be pulling the bus onto the side of the road," he said. "Bus drivers have to use their judgment."

As far as complaints about incidents on buses, parents should file such complaints with their school principals, Edwards said.

"Disciplinary matters are handled first and foremost at the school level," he said.

"Every incident is treated seriously."