

Board worried about bus incidents

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Cases of harassment need to be assessed

While county school officials say the school system takes sexual harassment and sexual assault very seriously, they want to examine whether more needs to be done to prevent incidents on school buses.

The reaction comes in the wake of recent Gazette reports detailing four such incidents involving middle school students within the last year.

Three of the incidents involved students from Roberto W. Clemente Middle School in Germantown.

In two cases girls were groped by boys during bus rides. In the other, the mother of a fifth-grade girl at Sally K. Ride Elementary in Germantown said she found her daughter in possession of a hand-written letter describing how to perform oral sex. A boy who attended Clemente, but rode the girl's bus under a special arrangement with the school, wrote the letter.

In a fourth incident, a special needs boy coerced a Cabin John Middle School girl with Down syndrome to perform a sex act on him during a bus ride home from the school in Potomac, according to a police report.

The names of the victims and their family members are being withheld to protect the victims' privacy.

"My attention has been grabbed by this," said Board Vice President Charles Haughey (At large) of Rockville. "From the story it sounds like there has been some kind of escalation in this

unacceptable behavior, and whatever it takes to root it out we need to do it immediately."

Haughey said the situation needs to be assessed on a number of fronts.

"... I think we have a lot of steps to take working with principals and security people and transportation people, to first establish that this is a problem beyond one or two incidents," he said.

"Second, if there are just these few incidents, to find highly effective ways to make sure they don't recur and thirdly, to find ways to monitor the problem."

Haughey added, "But if it were my child and it occurred more than once it would be a problem."

Other board members echoed his reaction.

"Certainly as a mother of daughters I find it totally out of line," board President Patricia B. O'Neill (Dist. 3) of Bethesda said. "Children who act out of line should be disciplined."

In three of the cases, the boys involved were disciplined, school officials said. It is unclear whether there was any disciplinary action taken in the Cabin John case. Parents of the victims in each case have taken issue with how the situations were handled by school staff or police.

Last month, a 12-year-old, seventh-grade girl told The Gazette that two boys groped her during a Feb. 15 bus ride to Clemente.

Her parents said the only contact they had from the school regarding the incident was a vague message left by the school's assistant principal on the mother's cell phone.

"We made one big mistake," Clemente Principal Rosalva Rosas said on Monday, "and it was with communication. I admitted to the parents, and I'll admit it to whoever that it was very unfortunate for the family not to get that direct communication. I

admit that, but it's not reflective of the work we do here every day."

Rosas agreed that the message left for the mother was too vague.

"You don't want to leave a detailed message," she said. "But it was generic enough that it did not alert her that it was serious."

The message was left the afternoon the incident occurred. The mother returned the phone call the next day, a Wednesday, but had no call back from school officials. The parents did not talk with administrators until the following Tuesday when they visited the school and demanded to speak with administrators.

"I will simply not tolerate inappropriate behavior in our schools and on our buses," Superintendent Jerry D. Weast said in a statement. "Our policies are clear and our principals and staff are trained to enforce them. All of us will do everything we can to make sure our kids have a safe, healthy and respectful learning environment."

Board member Sharon W. Cox (At large) of Germantown said some focus should be placed on getting students more involved in the process.

"I think the key for us is making sure that students understand their rights and responsibilities and that they understand that they need to report it when something that's happening should not be happening," she said. "What's not clear to me is whether students are reporting everything they should be reporting and then what are we doing to make sure they make us aware of that?"

Board member Nancy Navarro (Dist. 5) of Silver Spring said she "applauds the students that are coming forward and reporting these incidents. It's the only way we'd hear about it."

But Navarro said she worries about the incidents that adults do not hear about.

"I think it does raise a red flag for me as far as what's happening here, is there a problem?" she said.

Board member Gabriel Romero (Dist. 1) of Montgomery Village said he too would like to know if the recent incidents are isolated or widespread.

"If it's an item that could become systemic, then we as a board say 'Well, we're not doing this properly. We need to make changes,' " he said.