



For church, schools, it's about stopping new abuse

Re "Four abuse cases settled for \$10 million" and "District agrees to \$30M payout in claims" (March 13):

The two stories struck me in their sad parallels. Two cases of cash settlements, one involving the Catholic Church, the other the Los Angeles Unified School District, both involving sexual abuse scandals. The millions of dollars will do little to ease the pain of those who suffered, yet it remains the only tangible restitution the courts offer. The hope for both institutions is that they are serious and successful in their efforts to prevent future abuse from occurring. The Catholic Church's and LAUSD's business is not bottom lines or reputations, but the safety and protection of the most vulnerable — our children.

— *Jeanine D'Elia, Granada Hills*



STUDENT SAFETY

Bills target school abuse

Measures aim to reinforce reporting laws, make it easier to remove abusive teachers

By Theresa Harrington and Matthias Gafni

Staff writers

SACRAMENTO — With local school districts failing time and again to recognize and report suspected child abuse, an East Bay assemblywoman is introducing legislation to beef up training of school employees and give administrators more power to remove abusive teachers.

Assemblywoman Joan Buchanan, D-Alamo, cited the extensive reporting on the problems from the Bay Area News Group as she announced Tuesday the introduction of a pair of bills aimed at shoring up gaps in current law. Exact language of the bills has not been finalized.

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See **REPORTING**, Page 6

in investigating this problem, as well as our own research, that legislation is needed," Buchanan said in an email to Bay Area News Group, which recently published a survey of 94 districts' child abuse reporting practices, showing that many did not adequately train employees.

In recent months, horrifying incidents of school abuse — and districts' repeated failures to respond appropriately — have

emerged around the Bay Area. A San Jose principal was found guilty late last year of failure to report suspicions of abuse to authorities as state law requires, the first school official in the state to be convicted.

One of Buchanan's bills, AB1338, would require all districts to adopt board policies outlining child abuse reporting responsibilities and require them to review those policies with all employees each year. A second bill, AB375, would give school districts the ability to immediately remove teachers from classrooms in child abuse cases and would allow school districts to dismiss such teachers any time during the year.

A youth law expert said Buchanan's child abuse reporting bill is a "step in the right direction," but he said board policies are not the only problem.

"Current law already requires that teachers sign a statement acknowledging their duty to report suspected abuse," said William Grimm, senior attorney at Oakland's National Center for Youth Law. "A large part of the problem is the district's failure to provide training that helps school staff understand what should be reported. Until training is mandated for all school staff, there will continue to be victims whose suffering goes unreported."

In response to the news group survey, fewer than half the districts in Alameda, Contra Costa, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties that responded to the survey said they offer employees the type of training that experts encourage and the law suggests: annual instruction in recognizing signs of sexual or other physical abuse and reminders of the legal requirement to report to authorities any

suspicion of mistreatment.

Survey results underscored that vagueness in the law has exacerbated districts' failings, and at least 19 districts reported practices that run counter to the letter or intent of the law.

Only 29 districts said they have provided annual training about abuse and the law to all employees. Current law "strongly encourages" training without saying how often it should be provided, but experts agree it should be frequent.

Buchanan's efforts to address teacher discipline and dismissal may prove to be the most controversial part of her package. Past efforts to alter the law and streamline the process have failed amid strong union opposition, with Buchanan and others voting down legislation last year.

The issue resurfaced recently after a Brentwood special education teacher was convicted of child abuse and then transferred to another teaching position.

After this newspaper revealed the district paid a \$950,000 settlement to the family of the 5-year-old special needs student who was kicked, the community protested, and district officials apologized for their handling of the teacher. The



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superintendent was eventually fired, and the teacher's credentials were revoked.

Carol Carillo, executive director of the Child Abuse Prevention Council of Contra Costa County, praised Buchanan's bills but said the state also needs to provide additional money to child welfare departments so they can follow up on increased child abuse reports.

"Unless this legislation has some funding to help that process," she said, "then it isn't going to really benefit children in the long run."

The teacher dismissal bill has competing legislation from State Sen. Alex Padilla, D-Pacoima, who introduced Senate Bill 10 after a similar bill was shot down last year in the Assembly education committee, with Buchanan voting against it.

California Teachers Association spokesman Mike Myslinski said the union hasn't yet determined its positions on the bills.

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