

Sex-abuse case in Boston school exposes a lack of vigilance - Editorial

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CHILD ABUSERS count on their victims' silence. That condition jumped out in the recent case of a Boston teacher's aide accused of inappropriate sexual conduct with a nonverbal, autistic student at the Harbor Pilot Middle School in Dorchester. It is the silence of responsible adults that is so much harder to grasp.

LaShawn Hill, the accused aide, has pleaded not guilty to a charge of lewd and lascivious conduct. According to police, Hill had unzipped the child's pants to teach him about masturbation when he was discovered by a school staffer. Hill has worked at numerous camps, afterschool programs, church groups, youth dance programs, and schools throughout Boston. Police are investigating whether he acted inappropriately with children at any of his former jobs. But it is already clear that the Boston Public Schools missed an earlier opportunity to identify Hill as a possible predator.

Last spring, Hill was suspected of inappropriate contact with another special needs student at the King K-8 school in Dorchester. Principal Jessica Bolt conducted an internal investigation and concluded that there were no grounds for action. She didn't contact the state Department of Children and Families or inform her supervisors in the school department of the incident. That left a clear path for Hill to his next job with children.

School principals and teachers are mandatory reporters, meaning they are required to report suspicions of child abuse to the state. When suspicious incidents arise, wise educators don't torture themselves over whether they have "reasonable cause" to their suspicions. They pick up the phone and contact people with more expertise. It was a notable misjudgment on the part of the King School principal to dismiss the incident. Bolt, who has a solid reputation as an educator, will be suspended without pay for her failure to follow protocol, according to school officials. And today, every principal and headmaster in the city is expected to attend a training session on child abuse reporting.

"Suspicion is enough reason to file a complaint," said Marylou Sudders, president of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. "Haven't we learned anything?"

Boston's schools, at least, got it right the next time around. School officials quickly called police and child protection workers after the incident at Harbor Pilot Middle School. The school also contacted parents and established a hotline for anyone who might have additional information.

But like so many sexual-abuse cases, this one could have been avoided if preceded by some light.

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