

THIS COLUMN IS ONE OF A SERIES DEVOTED TO COMMENTARY FROM EDUCATION JOURNALISTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

Child Safety and Administrative Oversight

When I began covering education for the *Vancouver Sun*

six years ago, I was told by those who regulated the teaching profession that B.C. has some of the toughest laws in the country to keep students safe from adults who would do them harm. These laws are largely a result of the notorious Robert Noyes, a B.C. educator and pedophile who abused dozens of children from 1970 to 1985 while moving from school district to school district.

The long shadow of Noyes led to significant changes in the province, no question. Within a year, the B.C. College of Teachers was established to set standards for educators, and the School Act was amended to require school boards to report all discipline to the college for review. But several cases that have exploded in the media in recent years suggest B.C.'s protections for students are woefully inadequate. If these laws are among the best in Canada, one shudders to think what might be happening elsewhere.

The fact is school boards don't always know who they're hiring and have no way of being assured a prospective employee hasn't been in trouble for misconduct elsewhere in Canada or, indeed, even in the jurisdiction next door. The B.C. School Trustees' Association admitted as much years ago, and the provincial government has talked about the need for reform since 2001. Still, nothing has been done.

The best example of this problem showed up in Surrey in 2001 when a teacher was charged with setting three fires in a junior secondary school where she taught Grade 8 science. She was also known by students for smoking pot and using abusive language in class. Shortly after Tammy Chibanoff's arrest, it was revealed she had recently taught in neighbouring Maple Ridge but had been removed from two schools for bizarre behaviour. The board had placed her on medical leave but did not tell the college because

she was never officially disciplined. Chibanoff sought work in Surrey without mentioning she had been in Maple Ridge, and Surrey officials accepted her resume at face value.

Around the same time, a teacher in another Vancouver suburb – Langley – was convicted of sexually assaulting five students in his elementary school. In hiring Roger Mercier, Langley officials were unaware he had been in similar trouble in 1995 in Nova Scotia, where a letter had been placed on his file warning him to keep his hands off children.

This year, another colossal error came to light when the college revealed it had cancelled the license of a teacher who had admitted to having sex with minors on multiple occasions, even after being warned by authorities. Serge Lebedoff had been disciplined three times previously for other inappropriate sexual conduct, but the school district hadn't notified the college due to an "administrative oversight." The college refused to identify the district, but Abbotsford eventually confessed.

Reaction to these stories was mixed. The official voice was one of "concern" from all quarters, and after Lebedoff hit the news, the education minister ordered urgent meetings so that trustees, principals, teachers and parents could address the matter.

But I heard other messages as well. Some districts tried to distance themselves from the problem, suggesting that while others may have been lax about reporting discipline or checking references, they were not. No one demanded to know how Lebedoff, a long-time teacher-on-call, remained employed in the Lower Mainland despite problems dating back 10 years. The B.C. Teachers' Federation took a defensive stance even though there had been no suggestion it had done anything wrong. The union falsely accused me of digging up old news to embarrass its members (Lebedoff had resigned quietly in 2002) and suggested I had been fed the story by the college (not true) to show that teachers need constant scrutiny.

It's clear Lebedoff, Mercier and Chibanoff are not typical of teachers. But neither are they the only ones who pose a danger to children, and it's high time adults in the system who speak lovingly about their commitment to protecting children (read: everyone) publicly support whatever change is needed to keep students safe.

The B.C. government recently proposed tough new rules about reporting discipline and suggested penalties for failure to report. It has also called for a provincial employment registry for teachers that would include any discipline record and be publicly accessible. Ontario already has such a registry. B.C. has also urged the Council of Education Ministers Canada to consider establishing a national registry, which the council talked about in 1999 but never implemented.

If these proposals have flaws, then offer alternatives. Encourage public debate. Expose the shortcomings. Just don't sit quietly hoping the issue will fade from public attention.

Our children can't afford any more "administrative oversights". |

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