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Friday, March 7, 2008

Janus gives \$3 million to DPS

Denver Public Schools announced Thursday its largest ever corporate gift, a \$3 million donation to improve teacher recruitment and retention.

Janus Capital Group of Denver will provide the donation over three years to help the district attract, train and keep teachers over time. The plan is to streamline various teacher recruitment pipelines and better prepare new teachers for the classroom.

The Janus Education Alliance also will invest in veteran teachers, providing a career path for those interested in mentoring their younger peers.

Blair Johnson, senior vice president for corporate communications, said the company wanted to invest in something with lasting impact.

"It's very exciting to us," said Johnson, who received a stream of thrilled e-mails from employees after announcing the project Wednesday. "People are just rocking."

DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet said the gift will, among other things, enable the district to better recruit candidates for urban classrooms.

Kim Ursetta, president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association, also welcomed the Janus donation, saying, "We look forward to working with the district and Janus to develop a mentoring program to support our teachers."

DPS, DA at odds over 'kissing'

Sexual-contact reports jump over fear of prosecution

By Nancy Mitchell, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

Friday, March 7, 2008

Confusion over when Denver Public Schools staff members should call police - and why - has one principal facing charges, city social services workers overwhelmed by cases as innocuous as kissing 5-year-olds and the city's top prosecutor apparently unwilling to offer guidance.

A state law requiring DPS principals and teachers to report suspected child abuse and neglect immediately, including unlawful sexual contact, is intended to protect their students.

But applying the law has caused problems between DPS and Denver police, and conflicting interpretations in recent weeks have led school staff members to increase reports for fear they, too, could be charged.

"There's a lot of confusion over what needs to be reported and what doesn't," said Kim Ursetta, president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association. "Obviously, we have a legal duty to report, so it's even more important to make sure there's clear direction."

A Feb. 4 attempt at clarity, though, had the opposite effect. Denver Police Chief Gerry Whitman and Chief Deputy District Attorney Lamar Simms appeared before DPS principals to discuss the issue.

On a videotape of their talk, Whitman and Simms apparently disagree, at times placing their hands over the microphone as principals begin buzzing amid their growing confusion.

The session ends with DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet taking the mic and promising guidance will be coming.

A principal charged

A case involving three seventh-graders at Skinner Middle School, in northwest Denver, prompted the most recent concerns about reporting.

Principal Nicole Veltze, 37, considered a promising young DPS principal, was told on a Friday afternoon in December that a female student was inappropriately touched by two classmates.

Sources say she followed the DPS policy for an allegation of sexual harassment, quickly notifying an administrator in human resources.

A sexual assault, according to a legal reporting bulletin used by Denver principals, is defined as "a violent physical or verbal attack."

An assault warrants immediate notification of police; harassment does not.

But the girl's mother, perhaps upset that her daughter and not Veltze notified her of the touching, called police. That Sunday, police questioned Veltze. They later charged her with failing to report the crime as the law requires, a Class 3 misdemeanor.

Worry soon spread among DPS employees. After the Simms-Whitman talk, DPS attorney John Kechriotis issued an e-mail noting the presentation "exacerbated" the issue. The issue requires additional discussion with police and prosecutors, he wrote, adding, "For now, however, you should promptly report any incident which you reasonably believe constitutes a crime."

Wednesday, members of the City Council's safety committee heard testimony from Roxane White, manager of the Denver Department of Human Services, that her staff is being overwhelmed by referrals from DPS.

Cases such as two 5-year-olds kissing at a school are among the 251 school referrals in the month of February, up from a monthly average of 142.

"What has happened . . . is a great deal of fear for schoolteachers," White told council members, adding it's creating "huge system problems" for her "stressed" staff.

Whitman attended the meeting, as did DPS administrator Bob Anderson. Denver District Attorney Mitch Morrissey did not.

Morrissey's spokeswoman, Lynn Kimbrough, said he did not attend because of the pending case against Veltze, who is scheduled to make her first court appearance next week.

But Kimbrough also said Morrissey does not want to be involved in setting policy for the school district.

"We can explain what the law is but not set policy," she said.

If teachers are still confused about what to report, "those would seem to be training issues to clarify what the law is and what should be reported," she

said. "Two 5-year-olds kissing is pretty clearly not something you would report."

Questions about the reporting law abound, based on the videotape of the principals' presentation and the City Council committee meeting.

They include how quickly crimes are to be reported - is immediately two hours or 24 hours? - and which agency, police or social services, takes which reports.

Talks are ongoing

The issue is further confused because the law says principals are not to conduct their own investigations. So how does a principal know whether the claim made is reasonable?

In addition, the city attorney's office has issued a preliminary report saying a DPS employee can't be prosecuted unless they "willfully" fail to report an abuse or neglect claim they believe to be true.

Thursday, Bennet said there have been "several conversations," including a meeting last week in the mayor's office, to "make sure our policies reflect the desires of law enforcement."

"It's an ongoing conversation," he said. "We'd love to resolve it as soon as we can."

Linkhart and City Councilwoman Jeanne Faatz, also a member of the council's safety committee, said they have no jurisdiction over Morrissey, an elected official. Nor do they have any say over Bennet, who is appointed by the Denver school board.

But they said the reporting confusion is impacting two city agencies - police and social services. Linkhart said he hopes Morrissey will weigh in.

"The right thing is to try to get some clarity to people in terms of how they're going to prosecute," Linkhart said. "He's the head prosecutor, but that doesn't mean you essentially wait by the trap until someone falls in. You try to keep them from going into the trap."

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Reporting crime

Colorado law requires school principals and teachers to immediately report suspected crimes against children, including abuse and neglect.

But the law is open to interpretation.

How quickly is immediately? And what, exactly, constitutes abuse?

Charges filed against Skinner Middle School's principal recently prompted a surge in reporting to Denver police and social services.

Here's a look at how this issue has evolved:

February 2002 - Denver Police Capt. Tim Leary publicly accuses DPS officials of delays in reporting allegations of sexual assaults on students. Leary claims, in one case, an administrator threatened to expel a student if she reported a sexual assault.

The claims prompt meetings between Police Chief Gerry Whitman and then-DPS Superintendent Jerry Wartgow.

Ultimately, Whitman and then-Denver District Attorney Bill Ritter, now the governor, meet with DPS principals to clarify reporting guidelines.

The issue, however, lingers.

September 2007 - DPS announces a shift in its discipline policy, prompted by community concerns that too many students are being referred to police for minor incidents.

The new policy, called Restorative Justice, emphasizes talking by students involved in disputes to repair the harm done.

Rather than police referrals, students and their parents meet to discuss the problems and decide on reparations, such as letters of apology.

Community groups applaud the move but it raises concerns with Denver police, who meet with DPS officials to review the policy.

December 2007 - A student at Skinner Middle School reports being repeatedly touched on her chest, buttocks and "private parts" by two classmates while the teacher's back is turned. She reports the incident to Principal Nicole Veltze.

Veltze suspends the boys and offers the girl's mother the option of Restorative Justice.

The mother opts to call police and press charges. Veltze is later charged with a misdemeanor count of failure to report a crime at her school.

January 2008 - Veltze's attorney accuses Denver police and the Denver District Attorney's Office of making his client the scapegoat in an ongoing "turf battle" with DPS over reporting requirements in suspected abuse and neglect cases. Rich Caschette said his client followed DPS policy at every turn.

February - Chief Deputy District Attorney Lamar Simms and Denver Police Chief Gerry Whitman jointly address DPS principals on the issue of reporting allegations. But Simms and Whitman appear at times to disagree with each other, prompting even more concern from principals.

DPS attorneys issue a statement to principals urging them to "promptly report any incident, which you reasonably believe constitutes a crime," while the district seeks clarity on the issue.

March - Roxane White, the manager of the Denver Department of Human Services, reports to City Council Safety Committee members that referrals from DPS jumped 76.7 percent in the month of February. She said her staff is being overloaded with reports such as that of two 5-year-olds kissing at school.

City Council members Doug Linkhart and Jeanne Faatz call on DPS, Denver police and District Attorney Mitch Morrissey to work together to resolve the confusion.

An incident with repercussions

Confusion about when Denver Public Schools staff members are to report allegations to police stems largely from the charging of a school principal in January.

Nicole Veltze, principal of Skinner Middle School in northwest Denver, faces a misdemeanor count of failure to report an allegation of child abuse or neglect at her school.

According to police reports obtained by the Rocky Mountain News, here's what happened:

On Dec. 14, a seventh-grade girl reported to Veltze that she had been touched by two boys in her class.

The girl said the boys, also seventh-graders, repeatedly touched her on her buttocks, private parts and chest while the teacher had her back turned to the class.

She said she "froze" during the incidents and, after class, ran to a friend who took her to Veltze's office.

Veltze said she talked to both boys, and they admitted doing what the girl said. Both boys were suspended.

The dispute arises over whether, and when, Veltze should have called police.

According to reports, the girl told her mother after school on Friday, the day it occurred. The mother called Denver police. Police then contacted Veltze that Sunday, Dec. 16.

JOHNSON: Push to prosecute principal throws process into turmoil

By Bill Johnson, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

Originally published 12:30 a.m., March 7, 2008

Updated 01:33 a.m., March 7, 2008

PARKER: For charity, athletes play poker, throw dice

Story Tools

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iPod friendly Share this site Free Nicole Veltze.

It is the first thing that should be said here, closely followed by shame on Denver DA Mitch Morrissey.

Pssst, Mitch: She's one of the good people.

Exactly whose interests does it serve to dragoon and haul into court a well-regarded middle school principal who was just trying to do her job?

It certainly cannot serve Denver's interests or those of its long-troubled school district and its teachers and administrators, knowing the cops could show up at any time, wielding handcuffs, if they don't immediately rat out overly aggressive, tag-playing Little Johnny?

The arrest in January of Skinner Middle School Principal Nicole Veltze, as you may have read, has led to the Denver Department of Human Services being inundated over the past month with sexual and other abuse referrals involving schoolchildren from intimidated and scared-witless teachers and principals across the city.

Human Services officials on Wednesday told a City Council committee that the number of such referrals from DPS skyrocketed to 251 in February, a 55 percent increase from a month earlier.

"We are facing a crisis," Roxane White, manager of the Human Services Department, told the committee, pleading for a reconsideration of prosecutors' new "report-everything" recommendation to school administrators.

"We are being swamped and . . . at the same time the numbers of referral calls of real sexual abuse and neglect outside of the schools are rising," said Benilda Samuels, a Human Services spokeswoman. "It is splitting and diverting the little resources we have left."

The real question that arises from the 251 school referrals is exactly what kind of school-age predators are we unleashing on schools these days?

Benilda Samuels laughed.

"You have to understand that this is really just a function of fear and worry by teachers and administrators that they will get in trouble if they don't take action. It is Nicole Veltze times 251. They are trying to be safe."

Tell me, I ask, how the referral process works.

Every call is dealt with and investigated. Often, she said, a team of Human Services workers assigned to the schools will interview the kids involved and their parents, a resolution is arrived at and the case is put to rest.

If the child involved is over 10 years of age, police officers are summoned to investigate.

Sometimes, though, the police are called on younger children, she said. In the now-famous case of the 6-year-old boy who told his 6-year-old classmate that she had "a sexy booty," officers were called.

"The police actually went to the child's home," Benilda Samuels said. "Do you know how traumatizing that is for the child? Trust me, it is really scary."

No, what is scary is the obvious determination by Mitch Morrissey to criminalize even the youngest of Denver's schoolchildren simply for doing the things that young children will do.

What is worse is he has now eliminated from the process the very people whose knowledge and experience are best suited to deal with the odd schoolyard kiss or "sexy booty" comment.

Which gets us back to Nicole Veltze.

Her first court appearance on a charge of failure to report an unlawful sexual contact is scheduled for March 11. Morrissey's office has refused to comment on the case until it is adjudicated.

The case involves two 13-year-olds who touched a girl's breast and inner thigh during computer class. Nicole Veltze checked the school district's policy. It defined sexual assault as a "violent" physical attack. Believing what occurred to be nonviolent, she suspended the two boys.

Not satisfied, the girl's parents called the district and the police. The two boys and Nicole Veltze are now being prosecuted.

Prosecutors contend the principal violated the law by failing to call police "in a timely manner."

"What happened was sexual harassment under DPS policy, which means it did not have to be reported," said Rich Caschette, the principal's attorney.

She did not simply ignore the incident, and was in the process of completing the paperwork portion of her report when the police arrived, he said.

"She made a good-faith effort to follow district policy, and this is what she gets," he said.

"What makes it worse is Nicole is a talented and well-respected educator, a teacher and administrator DPS would bring in to solve problems at its most-troubled schools.

"She is an educator who put her butt on the line for our kids every day, and what do they do? They charge her," Rich Caschette said.

I asked him the same question you have: What does she plan to do?

"Even if she takes a plea, which I can't imagine, her career is over. We can't do that. She has to take this thing to trial."

Nicole Veltz, indeed, has to do it for the sake of our schools, the teachers, administrators and every kid in them, and if only to speed the return to the classroom of fearless common sense.

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Thursday, March 6, 2008

Record \$3 million gift for DPS

Denver Public Schools today announced its largest ever corporate gift, a \$3 million donation to improve teacher recruitment and retention.

Janus Capital Group of Denver will provide the donation over three years to help the district better attract, train and keep teachers over time.

The plan is to streamline various teacher recruitment pipelines — such as Teach for America, the New Teacher Project — and better prepare new teachers for the classroom.

But the Janus Education Alliance also will invest in veteran teachers, providing a career path for those interested in mentoring their younger peers.

Blair Johnson, senior vice president for corporate communications, said the company wanted to do more than write a check, they wanted to invest in something distinctive and with lasting impact.

"It's very exciting to us," said Johnson, who received a stream of thrilled emails from employees after announcing the project Wednesday. "People are just rocking."

DPS Superintendent Michael Bennet said the gift will, among other things, allow the district to better recruit candidates for city classrooms.

"We need to think about it the way we think about recruiting for a university freshman class," he said, "the highest-quality, most diverse group we can find."

Fox 21

Friday, March 7, 2008

5-year-olds reported to police for kissing

Posted: Friday, March 07, 2008 at 4:25 a.m.

DENVER (AP) -- Children as young as 5 years old who were caught kissing at school have been referred to law enforcement from Denver Public Schools after a principal was charged with failing to report an alleged sexual assault.

Referrals to Human Services from the school district jumped from an average of 142 a month to 251 in February, according to spokeswoman Benilda Samuels.

In January, prosecutors served a misdemeanor summons on Skinner Middle School principal Nicole Veltze for allegedly failing to report an unlawful sexual contact. Veltze was investigating the case, but the girl's mom notified police, said Veltze's attorney, Rich Caschette.

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9 News

Thursday, March 6, 2008

Grant aims to keep teachers from fleeing district

Written by Nelson Garcia, reporter

DENVER – Like every urban district across the nation, the Mile High City has a problem. Of all the first-teachers in the classroom this year, about half of them will be gone within five years.

"It's how you pay people. It's what the working conditions look like," said Michael Bennet, superintendent of Denver Public Schools. "It's how you bring people on and train them and support them."

That's why Bennet is happy to announce a partnership with the Denver-based Janus Capital Group. Janus granted the district \$3 million to help DPS recruit and retain more teachers.

"\$3 million over three years is the largest corporate gift the Denver Public Schools has ever received," said Bennet. "I think it's going to make a huge difference."

Bennet hopes it can improve the retention rate of teachers as well as establish ways to draw teachers from other parts of the country.

"Our effort now is going to be to really build an aggressive approach to recruiting," said Bennet.

Blair Johnson is senior vice president of corporate communications for the Janus Capital Group. Johnson says folks at Janus were extremely troubled by the number of teachers who leave DPS. Johnson hopes this money could turn things completely around.

"So, if we could recruit people as much as we recruit people from Wall Street, Denver could become an academic destination," said Johnson.

The money will also be used to create a teacher residency program. First-year teachers would be mentored by experienced master teachers.

"I think mentors can help you get excited about what you're doing," said Danna Barker, a 1st grade teacher at Edison Elementary.

Barker's been in DPS for 27 years. She had a mentor and says the expansion of master teachers will help keep teachers from leaving Denver.

"Just having someone say, you know hang in there, because you will just love this in the end. You will just love it," said Barker. "It does make a difference and hopefully we're producing teachers that will mentor others."

Fox 31

Thursday, March 6, 2008

DPS Social Services Dispute Over Inappropriate Behavior

Created: Thursday, 06 Mar 2008, 8:53 PM MST

By SEAN TOBIN, Reporter

DENVER -- Denver City Councilman Doug Linkhart is serious about kids. Linkhart thinks new guidelines by Denver Public Schools for reporting sexual assaults go too far.

"Sexual assault is a very serious matter, and we want to protect the kids, but at the same time we don't want our case workers chasing down stories that really aren't problems.", said Linkhart.

Linkhart has concerns about a January seminar that encouraged principals district wide to report any type of inappropriate behaviors to police is deluging police and social services with unnecessary reports.

"We're sending too many police officers and too many social workers out chasing down little kids who are doing nothing but, having fun.", said Linkhart.

Linkhart cites a recent case where a DPS principal was charged with a crime because she tried to mediate and didn't report an incident.

Greenwood Elementary principal Ruth Navarro Frazier---along with other principals in the district attended that January seminar.

"My understanding now, is that professional judgement is not a part of it.", said Navarro Frazier.

They were told....what they used to mediate in school yard, is now a routine call to police.

"What were being told now, is that we don't have that descretionary ability anymore, that we are supposed to report any type of inappropriate sexual behavior right to the police department.", Frazier tells FOX31 News.

CW2

Friday, March 7, 2008

Innocent play or sex assault?

Denver schools suddenly report 75 percent more "sex crimes" to cops in February

by Jenny Dean Schmidt, News2

DENVER (KWGN) — What, exactly, is a sex crime?

In Denver Public Schools, it can be as little as a hug.

There is a growing controversy over what exactly the Denver District Attorney is asking of Denver Public School employees, when it comes to reporting potential sex crimes on school grounds. DPS employees say they feel pressured by the DA's office to report even minor incidents of contact between kindergartners as potential crimes.

The controversy began back in January when the DA decided to prosecute a DPS principal for failing to report a sexual incident between two 13-year-olds. This is when DPS employees said they began to feel pressure to report even minor incidents to the police and Denver Human Services.

When Ellis Elementary student Breana James was asked about any incidents she had witnessed, she answered, "I'm in 4th grade and 4th grade kids, they like to hit each other on the butt."

It's incidents like this that have become the topic of debate within Denver schools, and now the schools say they're being pushed to report these incidents as potential crimes.

"The DA was saying you need to report everything from kindergarten on. You know, there's an innocent pat on the backside, it gets reported," explained Ruth Navarro Frazier, Principal at Marie L. Greenwood school.

Denver Councilman Doug Linkhart added, "You know, it has gotten out of control. There's more reporting of crime now than ever in elementary schools."

Linkhart says the number of sexual incidents reported by DPS schools in just the last month has skyrocketed by over 75%. And, he expresses concern that schools are being forced to treat more and more students and their parents as criminals.

"There was a five-year-old kissing a five-year-old, boy and girl, in an elementary school, and they were hauled into Human Services," said Linkhart.

"I think it's good that they're reporting that, but they're going a little too far," said Adele Chavez, whose children attend Ellis Elementary, a DPS school.

The feeling is echoed by Frazier, who said bluntly, "The DA's overreacting." The DA's office is facing tough criticism from school employees, like Frazier, as well as government officials and parents.

"Kids are gonna be kids, you know," points out one father of an Ellis first-grader. He and other parents said they're more worried about violence in schools or the quality of education than "an innocent pat on the backside."

Still, even the critics agree that such incidents cannot be completely dismissed. They say most incidents should be addressed with the student and their parents, rather than reporting to police and Human Services. The Denver DA's office declined to comment on the criticism.

Plans are underway for a meeting between the Mayor, DPS and the DA's office, in order to come up with an acceptable approach for reporting potential sexual assaults in Denver schools, one that seems reasonable to all parties.

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United Press

Thursday, March 6, 2008

5-year-olds investigated for kissing

Published: March 6, 2008 at 6:52 PM

DENVER, March 6 (UPI) -- Denver officials said school sexual harassment reports are getting ridiculous, after two 5-year-olds were reported to child-welfare officials for kissing.

City Councilman Doug Linkhart, chairman of the City Council Safety Committee, said after a Wednesday meeting of the panel that the report to child welfare of two 5-year-olds kissing on a school playground was a sign that Denver Public Schools employees are reporting frivolous cases, the Rocky Mountain News reported Thursday.

"It's just getting to the point of ridiculousness where we're prosecuting kids for kissing," he said.

The Denver Post reported a 6-year-old boy was recently investigated by police and social service workers after he told a girl of the same age that she had "a sexy booty."

The incidents follow a recommendation from prosecutors that teachers be more vigilant in reporting sexual harassment in schools, after Principal Nicole Veltze of Skinner Middle School was prosecuted for failing to report a sexual harassment claim.

Roxane White, the manager of the Denver Department Human Services, said referrals from the school system jumped 55 percent from January to February.

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