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## 25 Investigates finds state laws enable secrecy over sexual abuse in Mass. public schools

The story was originally published in [Boston 25 News](#)

(<https://www.boston25news.com/news/local/25-investigates-finds-state-laws-enable-secrecy-over-sexual-abuse-ma-public-schools/YTB4U5XAHRCELAJU5WVSDTKH3Q/>).

(<https://www.statnews.com/2023/04/28/lockdowns-prisons-mental-health/>) with support from our **2023 National Fellowship**.

by CHJ Fellow [Kerry Kavanaugh \(/kerry-kavanaugh\)](#)



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**November 15, 2023**

BOSTON — A woman says she endured years of sexual abuse at a southeastern Massachusetts school starting when she was just 11 years old.

“I don’t even want to think about the hours I’ve spent in therapy and medications I’ve taken and tried,” she said. “And just to try to have a normal life.”

25 Investigates agreed to protect her identity as a survivor of sexual abuse.

“One of the administrators at the school started paying a lot of attention to me,” she said.

“It felt nice. It felt special.”

“It was picking me out of the hallway to tell me I looked nice or telling me I did really well on an exam or at a game.”

She says the administrator started pulling her out of the cafeteria at lunchtime to have lunch in his office with him.

“And that seemed a little weird, but it wasn’t weird enough for me to start to push back at that point,” she said. “It got really weird when he started pressuring me to sit on his lap in his office.”

The abuse – which took place in the 1990s – then progressed to forced oral sex, and other men being involved.

“I was terrified of this person,” she said.

But she adds: “I was also raised, like a lot of kids, that you should be able to trust people in positions of authority and you should do what adults tell you to do. So, this was really weird to me, but I didn’t have any kind of language to speak up about it. I certainly didn’t know who I could talk to about it, and I thought maybe I was doing something wrong.”

25 Investigates has uncovered scores of cases of sexual abuse by Massachusetts public school staff over the past decades – and spoken with survivors who say that abuse has left them with lasting emotional scars and years of trauma.

And our team reveals that school districts are fighting to keep basic details about perpetrators secret – even in cases where abuse is documented.

25 Investigates found at least 75 school personnel in Massachusetts have faced criminal charges or lawsuits filed since 2002 accusing them of sexually abusing students.

Our database only looked at cases either involving staff engaging in physical sexual contact with students, or school staff who sent sexually explicit messages to students or who took sexually explicit photos or videos of students.

25 Investigates filed records requests with hundreds of school districts and police agencies and traveled to courthouses to gather and analyze hundreds of pages of criminal records, on top of a mounting pile of lawsuits facing public schools.

We found a pattern of alleged abusers who are often regarded as popular, having fostered trust and respect with colleagues and students. Abuse has taken place in classrooms and closets, or in cars and basements.

Teachers pulled children out of class, or abused them during after-school extracurriculars. Victims include elementary school children and special needs students – and experts say children who may feel lonely or neglected at home are particularly vulnerable.

And we spoke to over a dozen survivors, child sexual abuse experts, prosecutors and lawmakers who said that too frequently, schools in Massachusetts miss opportunities to prevent and stop sexual abuse – all to the detriment of survivors.

## ONGOING CRIMINAL CASES, MOUNTING LAWSUITS

25 Investigates found at least:

- 65 school staff were criminally charged.
- 31 school staff pleaded guilty or were convicted (Some are appealing their sentences).
- 17 cases are open and pending.
- Three teachers died before trial.
- One case did not move forward because prosecutors decided it was not in the best interest of the child victim.
- In at least nine cases, charges were dropped, or staff were acquitted.
- Two cases were sealed.
- 25 Investigates is trying to ascertain the status of three other criminal cases.

We reviewed criminal charges and lawsuits filed since 2002 – though conduct in some cases dates as far back as the 1970s.

We found ongoing allegations of abuse: 25 Investigates found at least 11 school staff have been criminally charged for sexual abuse in just 2022 and 2023 alone.

Those recent allegations include:

A custodian allegedly caught on video groping a 16-year-old drama club student in a closet at Wareham High School.

A science teacher accused of forming a volleyball club as a cover-up for his sexual abuse of a girl at New Leadership Charter School in Springfield.

A high school athletic trainer accused of victimizing girls he was supposed to be treating at Lowell High School.

A physical education teacher accused of sexually abusing 12 elementary school girls, including while in gym class and in school hallways at Saltonstall School in Salem.

A growing number of current and former Massachusetts students have filed state and federal lawsuits to seek justice and push schools to do more to prevent and address abuse.

Those students' lawsuits argue that public schools have violated their civil rights and left them vulnerable to sexual abuse by failing to properly address, report and investigate allegations. Several lawsuits claim schools swept troubling conduct by educators under the rug – only for those same educators to go on to sexually abuse more children.

25 Investigates found at least 17 public school employees have faced sex abuse lawsuits filed by students since 2002 – including six staffers who also faced criminal charges.

At least seven of those lawsuits are ongoing, but others have ended in settlements: we discovered one Mary Doe victim was awarded a \$6 million judgment after suing the Town of Auburn and Auburn Schools in 2022.

In that lawsuit, the victim had sued over her sexual abuse at the hands of former music teacher Stephen Jaszek.

In 2022, a Worcester Superior Court **judge sentenced Jaszek** (<https://www.boston25news.com/news/local/ex-auburn-elementary-school-teacher-sentenced-up-20-year-prison-raping-student/37XNMP2EZVAOFFPGJLNBARJSJL/>) to 18-20 years for raping the then-fourth-grade student multiple times during the day in a classroom while school was still in session in 2009 and 2010.

The lawsuit claimed Auburn Public Schools had a de-facto policy of not investigating or reporting alleged child abuse due to a lack of training and policies.

“As a result... Jaszek engaged in and continued to engage in, unfettered sex-based misconduct, including sexual and psychological abuse of Mary,” the lawsuit reads. “On information and belief, based on the statements of witnesses, Jaszek committed similar misconduct against other females before and after the abuse Mary endured during her fifth-grade year.”

Mary Doe's lawsuit against Jaszek himself continues.

Auburn Public Schools didn't immediately respond to request for comment.

## AS MANY AS 150 STUDENTS ABUSED

As many as one in 10 of public school students will face sexual abuse or harassment by adults at school, **according to a 2004 Congressional report** (<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED483143.pdf>) by researcher Carol Shakeshaft at the behest of the U.S. Department of Education.

That would amount to 91,000 kids in Massachusetts alone.

“Most of the abusers do not go into education in order to abuse students,” Shakeshaft, now a Virginia Commonwealth University educational leadership professor, said. “And many of them would never abuse a student, would never think they would abuse a student. What happens is one boundary crossing to another boundary crossing. None of them are stopped.”

Shakeshaft, who is finishing a book on educator sexual misconduct, said schools must have specific policies about acceptable professional behavior and interactions – and teach students and staff about those policies.

But she said – policies are often lackluster and focus more on sexual harassment than misconduct.

And, administrators too often fail to follow through on those very policies, she said.

“In almost every case I've studied, people saw things,” she said. “People even mention things, some people have reputations. They were called names, like perv or touchy, or handsy, but no one ever did anything. No one ever supervised, observed, checked on them, reprimanded them, had sanctions or consequences for violating policies or boundaries or expectations.”

All told – 25 Investigates found as many as 150 students abused by MA public school personnel in criminal and civil allegations raised since 2002.

That includes at least 57 students abused in cases with criminal sentences or civil settlements.

That's on top of at least 94 alleged victims named in open criminal cases and ongoing lawsuits.

The age of victims runs the gamut: from kindergarten to 18.

Jobs held by alleged perpetrators included teachers, custodians, coaches, paraprofessionals, robotics team mentors, dean of students, athletic trainers, guidance counselors, drama teachers, special education teachers, chorus instructors and a school resource officer.

Disturbing allegations ranged from years of rape and abuse to teachers secretly recording themselves sexually assaulting students.

School employees have faced charges from statutory rape to indecent assault and battery on a child under the age of 14 by a mandated reporter, to child enticement.

And their sentences have ranged from 20 years, to 18 months for statutory rape, to 10 years probation.

## RELEASING DATA COULD BE AN 'EMBARRASSMENT TO THE PERPETRATORS'

25 Investigates filed hundreds of public records requests with public schools and police agencies statewide for records about sexual abuse of school employees by teachers since 2017.

The vast majority of school and police departments declined to provide details about such misconduct – even in cases where sexual abuse was documented.

Multiple school districts – including Woburn, Wachusett, Masconomet, Quabbin Regional, North Attleboro and Attleboro – told 25 Investigates that releasing records of school employees with sexual assault findings could “undoubtedly result in personal embarrassment to the perpetrators” as well as victims.

That makes it impossible to know how often public school employees are sexually abusing students each year in Massachusetts – and whether any schools are seeing repeated instances of abuse.

Massachusetts requires schools to collect discipline data on sexual assaults by students – but not by staff.

25 Investigates received dozens of redacted reports of student-on-student sex assaults without cost.

In letters denying access to details of sexual abuse by school staff, lawyers for schools and police departments **cited a state law** (<https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleVII/Chapter41/Section97D>) that keeps secret all reports of sexual and domestic violence.

That law says “all reports of rape and sexual assault or attempts to commit such offenses... shall not be public reports...”

In a letter denying 25 Investigates access to the records, Winthrop police department wrote: “It is in my opinion that records that may be responsive are exempt under Massachusetts General Law c. 41, § 97D.”

“There is no adequate way to redact the requested records so to protect the privacy interests underlying G.L. c. 41 § 97D,” the response continued.

Dozens of schools said it would cost them thousands of dollars to go through hundreds of individual personnel files to find and redact reports of sexual misconduct by school staff.

Among the costliest estimates came from Wareham Public Schools, which said its “conservative fee estimate” was \$125,200.

That was for 5,008 hours of work at a \$25 hourly cost.

Shrewsbury Public Schools estimated they would charge us \$97,475 to “search every student record and every employee personnel file from Sept. 1, 2017 to present to see if there are any responsive records.”

Shrewsbury said that estimate was “substantially less than the actual cost to the District to respond to this request.”

Westford Public Schools said they’d charge us \$10,000 – but that it would actually cost them \$97,450 to fulfill our records request.

Other schools with steep estimates include:

- Melrose Public Schools: \$75,035.
- Barnstable Public Schools: \$61,459.
- Newton Public Schools: \$47,145.
- Berlin-Boylston Regional School District: \$38,275.
- And Hingham Public Schools: \$22,950.

Some schools said they could provide records at a much lower cost: Fall River School Committee estimated \$150.

Lawyer Mitchell Garabedian, who has represented scores of survivors of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy and other powerful institutions, said schools have long tried to downplay and hide allegations of sexual abuse.

“The public schools are worried about our reputation, our jobs, our funding,” he said.

The secrecy over sexual misconduct by school personnel makes it impossible to know how good of a job that Massachusetts schools are doing of protecting children.

For example: the lack of details made it impossible for 25 Investigates to determine whether schools are always reporting suspected educator sexual abuse.

It’s unclear how often staff who have faced allegations or warnings for sexual misconduct with students wind up getting jobs elsewhere.

And it’s hard for the public to know whether their local schools are keeping kids safe.

The federal U.S. Department of Education asks schools to report instances of documented rapes and attempted rapes on school grounds through its **Civil Rights Data Collection surveys** (<https://ocrdata.ed.gov/>).

Massachusetts reported 45 rapes or attempted rapes on school grounds in 2017-2018, the most recent year of data available.

That was the third highest rate in the nation.

That data isn’t broken down by educator or student, meaning it’s impossible to know who’s committing the rapes.

Experts say Massachusetts’ ranking could simply reflect better reporting rates in the state.

25 Investigates sent out dozens of records requests to schools that reported rapes and attempted rapes.

In nearly all instances, schools and police agencies said they either didn’t have any records of such incidents – or refused to release even redacted details that would indicate whether schools alerted police or the state.

Some police departments said they didn’t get any reports of rapes or attempted rapes from schools.

Shakeshaft said state and federal data collection on the extent of sexual abuse has remained inadequate for years: “We’ve tried to get funding for more studies nationwide to kind of keep documenting abuse. We just run into roadblocks.”

## TIP OF THE ICEBERG

Meanwhile, child abuse experts say the numbers uncovered by 25 Investigates are just the tip of the iceberg — because most cases don’t end up in court, even if school or state investigators find evidence of sexual abuse.

For example: 25 Investigates found two teachers fired for sexual misconduct at Shawsheen Tech in the 2013-2014 and 2016-2017 school years – but we did not find any criminal cases for any Shawsheen Tech teachers.

### **A 2022 study of 325 child sex abuse cases**

(<https://www.wcwoonline.org/images/pdf/2022-williams-block-pcsa-white-paper.pdf>) in Massachusetts found that about half stalled out at the investigation stage and fewer than one-fourth ended up prosecuted.

Just 14% ended in a determination of guilt.

University of Massachusetts-Lowell psychology professor Stephanie Block said barriers to prosecution include the difficulty of having children testify and a high bar for evidence.

“Sometimes families don’t trust the systems that are designed to protect them,” Block, one of the authors of the 2022 study, said.

“In these cases, people expect that there will be different types of forensic evidence,” Block said. “But it is very rare in these cases for there to be any evidence other than the statement of a child or an adult talking about what happened to them as a child. So it often comes down to the word of a child versus the word of an adult. So evidentiary issues or if there’s issues with the child’s disclosure, that can be an issue for these cases moving forward.”

She said support from caregivers – like a parent or other family member – is critical.

“When a child reports sexual abuse, there are lots of logistical things that need to happen,” Block said. “They need to potentially have a forensic interview. They need to go have meetings with different law enforcement. They have to go to court. And there needs to be someone who can take them to do those things and also emotionally support them and be there for them throughout that process.”

It can take years for children to come forward about abuse, Block noted.

“Research indicates that there is a major concern about under-reporting,” she said. “Because of children delaying disclosure or just not wanting to tell, and concerns about being believed or just being supported or ready.”

Block said her team also found cases were more likely to move forward when perpetrators were over 35 years old, and the victim was female.

“People don’t want to hear about sex abuse happening to children,” Block said. “And people don’t want to believe that it’s happening so often and in their communities by doctors and lawyers and teachers and trusted community members. We don’t want to think about it. We don’t want to admit that it’s happening. And it can be hard to wrap our minds around.”

Garabedian said it’s time for the years of secrecy and stigma to end.

“There’s still this odd stigma of it being shameful for a person to be sexual have been sexually abused,” Garabedian said. “And so, the parents don’t want that stigma attached to a child.”

## **‘OLD BOYS NETWORK’**

25 Investigates reviewed our own coverage of sexual abuse in public schools and found several cases where parents have demanded answers when school leaders **failed to report abuse right away** (<https://www.boston25news.com/news/cohasset-middle-school-teacher-charged-with-indecently-assaulting-girl-in-class/840652505/>), or notify families.

In letters denying 25 Investigates access to details about sexual abuse cases, lawyers for school districts said the public can get such information from news reports or the online teacher licensing portal.

But the final outcome of criminal charges aren’t always made public. And **that database** (<https://www.doe.mass.edu/licensure/lookup/>), lacks information on unlicensed school staff or details about whether a teacher had a license sanctioned for sexual misconduct.

Glenn Koocher, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, acknowledged it can be hard for the public to ever learn about cases of sexual abuse in schools.

“Sometimes they don’t get as much attention because it often is preceded by a resignation and sometimes the actual prosecution of such doesn’t make the newspapers or people aren’t aware of it,” Koocher said. “In a previous era, a lot of this

was covered up in the old boys network and old girls network – you ought to know better, transfer the teacher.”

“There are things you can say to kids that won’t get you to court but that will get you kicked out of the classroom,” he added.

Koocher said he’s noticed a greater level of awareness and willingness to report sexual abuse in schools in recent years.

But Koocher said it’s hard to say whether actual incidents of abuse are increasing or decreasing: “I’m not suggesting the problem is getting worse or better. I’m suggesting a lot of it, if it’s reported officially, does not get reported publicly for various reasons of confidentiality. That would be information the public would probably want to have.”

## DCF DOCUMENTS SEX ABUSE BY SCHOOL STAFF

Schools are required to report suspected sexual misconduct by licensed educators to the state Department of Children and Families.

We asked the state for numbers on teachers reported and investigated for sexual misconduct going back to 2000.

DCF said it only had data starting in 2018.

The agency said that from 2017 to 2022, DCF investigators supported sexual abuse allegations against 61 public school personnel.

That’s an average of 10 licensed educators with a documented allegation of sexual abuse each year.

That data didn’t include a breakdown for how allegations involved students. 25 Investigates has requested that information.

It’s unclear whether DCF is investigating all allegations of school abuse it receives.

The agency did not provide 25 Investigates with requested data about the number of sexual abuse allegations it receives and investigates.

## DOZENS OF TEACHER LICENSES SANCTIONED FOR SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

So, how many teachers end up losing their licenses because of sexual misconduct?

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education used to publicly release those records – but it told 25 Investigates it has stopped tracking that aggregate data.

25 Investigates is fighting for those records.

In 2015, **25 Investigates** (<https://www.boston25news.com/news/fox25-investigates-disturbing-trend-of-alleged-teacher-sexual-misconduct-1/7359410/>) found 83 teachers lost their license over sexual misconduct over the previous six years.

At the time, DESE released details concerning those license sanctions – including whether teachers were accused of sexual relationships with students.

But when 25 Investigates requested that same data in September, a DESE spokesperson said the department no longer maintains such aggregate records.

“Please be advised that changes to the public records law and its exemptions have required adjustments to the way in which DESE collects, maintains, and produces to the public personal data and records about licensees on whom DESE has taken disciplinary action,” reads DESE’s public records response. “While the investigatory files of individual licensees contain information about allegations, allegations frequently are subject to exemptions from the public records law.”

DESE did release names of teachers with any license sanctions since 2005 – but did not provide any details on why teachers faced sanction.

Now, 25 Investigates is awaiting the results of another public records request for license sanctions against individual teachers since 2015.

DESE says it will take eight weeks to review and redact potentially 43 additional cases of teachers who have had their licenses suspended or revoked since 2015.

All told, that means over 120 teachers in Massachusetts may have lost their license due to sexual misconduct over the past decade-and-a-half.

Administrators who dismiss, decline to renew or obtain the resignation of licensed educators for misconduct **must alert DESE within 30 days.**

([https://urldefense.com/v3/\\_https://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/advisory/child-abuse.html\\_";!!F8-Dj6fVkJZl!f\\_4Y0Veio1dOnoBa-E2QGNc8dO91sVb5CByeYvT\\_KfHRizf1lq58UyaCx8bbZQqumqrzA9VoGdO9Kmssc3W2Qdo3rdVyeYrj6cs2LQ\\$](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/advisory/child-abuse.html_)).

We asked the state for data on how often administrators who fail to report sexual misconduct wind up with sanctions from DESE.

DESE said it did not have any records showing such sanctions have been levied.

And the agency said releasing administrators' reports of sexual misconduct would have a "chilling effect" on investigations.

25 Investigations found a gap in state oversight of sexual abuse in schools: Schools are not required to report alleged misconduct by unlicensed staff to DESE.

That makes it hard to keep track of unlicensed school staff – like substitute teachers, custodians and paraprofessionals – with sexual misconduct allegations that never rise to the criminal level.

We asked DESE for records of schools reporting substitute teachers and other non-licensed employees for sexual misconduct.

DESE said those reports aren't required, and that any records that exist are exempt from public records law because they could also compromise investigative efforts.

## STATE AGENCIES DECLINED INTERVIEW REQUESTS

DCF and DESE both rejected 25 Investigates requests for interviews, and instead provided statements.

DESE spokesperson Jacqueline Reis said: "The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is committed to keeping students safe and to connecting districts to tools that they can use to conduct required background checks and review the license status of potential employees. The vast majority of the Commonwealth's more than 76,000 educators are caring adults who focus on their students' wellbeing, but in rare cases when an educator loses their license, we share their license status on our public lookup, with districts, and with other states."

DCF spokesperson Andrea Grossman said when DCF investigators support findings of abuse and/or neglect against teachers in a school setting, the agency sends those reports to DESE.

The state Office of the Child Advocate also declined our interview request.

OCA spokesperson Melissa Threadgill said the office **launched a new online training**

([https://urldefense.com/v3/\\_https://mandatedreportertraining.com/massachusetts/\\_";!!F8-Dj6fVkJZl!cQZRfrn5xRqkj32P\\_4wmnVBGJ605WHxOownwEJxw1KxePRhsymJPhciloQGJQir42\\_E9d1aP3N7exQI58\\_16bnRNC](https://urldefense.com/v3/_https://mandatedreportertraining.com/massachusetts/_)) on mandated reporting for educators this year.

Threadgill said that the Child Advocate has concerns about DCF-substantiated cases of abuse and neglect in out-of-homes settings – including schools.

"Our concerns relate to how accusations of sexual abuse of children and youth in out-of-home settings are reported, investigated, and resolved," Threadgill said in a statement. "We are already in the process of reviewing this issue and its many contours, and we anticipate that we will have findings and recommendations to share on this topic at a yet undetermined future date."

Massachusetts Teachers Association also rejected an interview request.

Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents Executive Director Thomas Scott said he could not be available for an on-camera interview because of scheduling conflicts.

In a phone interview, Scott said media attention has raised public awareness of sexual abuse in schools and other institutions.



“The attention has certainly caused people to be much more focused around certain behaviors that can lead to something more sinister,” he said.

He said school districts in past years have revamped policy manuals and student handbooks to better address sexual abuse.

Scott said recent changes to health curriculum standards provide flexibility for schools to offer age-appropriate education on personal boundaries.

“Students have to be aware of the contacts in the school environment where they can go if and when there’s an incident that they feel requires some kind of initial confidential conversation leading to some actionable steps,” he said.

He said school districts are required to take incidents of sexual abuse seriously.

“That give signals to everybody else, it’s not behavior that’s going to be acceptable,” he said.

Scott said schools have more work to do: “This is not a one-and-done thing.”

## “ARE YOU OKAY?”

The woman who survived abuse at a southeastern Massachusetts school said the state is failing kids.

“Absolutely. This is a basic safety concern,” she said. “There’s so much one person can do. But we have to not be afraid of speaking up. We have to do the right thing, even when it’s the hard thing.”

She said there were countless warning signs that could have prevented her abuse – particularly when her abuser would take her out of class.

“The piece of my story that’s really powerful is that people did notice,” she said. “You know, teachers did ask me: ‘Are you okay?’ I’d come back and I’d be all upset and just spaced out.”

She said teachers were in a “culture that allowed this administrator to do whatever he wanted.”

“There was no culture that supported them in speaking up against this person,” she said.

The survivor said she reported the abuse to her district attorney’s office – but says due to her lack of evidence, her case hasn’t gone anywhere.

In Part Two, 25 Investigates probes why Massachusetts has failed for years to pass laws that advocates say would boost screening requirements, require abuse prevention training in schools, lift statute of limitations for child sexual abuse and make it easier for prosecutors to charge educators who sexually abuse students once they turn 16.

**TAGS:** [Community Safety \(/tags/community-safety/\)](/tags/community-safety/).

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