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Teacher-sex cases lead to more training about conduct

Leonel Sanchez STAFF WRITER

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The Grossmont Union High School District is strengthening its **teacher** conduct training in light of three arrests of district teachers on sex-related charges involving students during the past year.

"We're not looking the other way," district spokeswoman Catherine Martin said. "It's a terrible thing that has occurred."

The cases shocked parents, teachers and students at the two East County schools involved: West Hills High School in Santee and Helix Charter High School in La Mesa.

The cases and other recent arrests around the county -- including those of an Eastlake High School campus assistant and a La Jolla Country Day School basketball coach -- have happened at a time when teacher sexual misconduct is drawing national attention.

An Associated Press investigation published last month found that 2,570 educators nationwide, including 313 in California, were punished or removed for sexual misconduct between 2001 and 2005.

Governors, legislators and school officials nationwide are exploring ways to tighten measures to prevent teacher sexual misconduct in light of the AP report.

Charol Shakeshaft, an expert on teacher sex abuse who heads the educational leadership department at Virginia Commonwealth University, said cases have always existed but were underreported. She credited media attention with forcing discussion of the issue.

Martin emphasized that teacher sexual misconduct is rare in the Grossmont district, which has about 1,000 teachers, counselors and librarians. But she said additional training was deemed necessary because of the three recent cases.

* Last month, John C. Holler, a teacher for 15 years at West Hills High, was arrested on suspicion of molesting a 17-year-old female student in his car outside the school. A friend of the student alerted school administrators, who contacted law enforcement.

Holler, who has pleaded not guilty, is described by prosecutors in court records as "motivated by an unnatural and abnormal sexual interest in children."

* On Thursday, former Helix High music teacher and band director Jessica Ashley Kahal, 22, pleaded guilty to having sex with a 17-year-old male student and faces up to one year in jail.

She was arrested in October and had been working at the La Mesa school since August. Her roommate reported the relationship to authorities.

* In February, former Helix High assistant band director Frank Palumbo, 28, pleaded guilty to two charges of unlawful sexual intercourse with a 17-year-old student last December and was placed on five years' probation. The girl's father reported the relationship to authorities. Palumbo, who had worked at the school since 2005, was accused of having sex with the girl three times, the first Dec. 15, the day he resigned to take a job at a Texas school.

The Grossmont district now plans to train about 100 administrators, including principals, in late February on ways to discuss conduct around students with staffers.

"We want staff to feel like they have the best understanding of how to report incidents, how to keep themselves out of situations, the protocol for giving students rides," Martin said.

A sheriff's sex crimes investigator, crisis counselors and a lawyer who advises the district on employee conduct will lead the session, which will be in addition to regular sexual harassment training, Martin said.

Staff members are instructed from the outset of their employment about proper behavior around students, Martin said. All employees are fingerprinted and undergo background checks before they are hired.

Helix High principal Doug Smith said there is high awareness of the issue at his school. He questioned whether more training is the answer.

"Most all teachers act appropriately and know not to cross the line," he said in an e-mail response to questions from a reporter.

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