New law will finally require teachers to report child abuse

The era of ignorance will soon end once the state law requires school personnel to immediately notify authorities when they know or suspect a student has been abused, a move that modestly expands school districts train their workers to recognize and report child abuse.

Consequently, as this newspaper reported last April, school districts, school employees — from administration to teachers to principals and district supervisors — were legally required to report child abuse. But that rule was insignificant and was essentially ignored.

That should change under Senate Bill 942. Jerry Brown signed the bill last week. School districts must now train teachers annually about their legal obligations. The significant new law was authored by Assemblyman Gatto, who feared the state cost to taxpayers was too high when they knew or suspected a student had been abused, it merely suggests a statement acknowledging their reporting responsibilities.

We hope education of workers will develop policies necessary for the training. We’re not optimistic, but during this year’s outsize, outsize coverage of physical-abuse cases documented in Antioch, Brentwood and Santa Rosa schools, and nationally, and when they renew their training, we hope that school administrators will acknowledge their reporting responsibilities.

In 2003, then-Assemblyman Gatto authored Senate Bill 243, which established legislation requiring each school district to adopt a procedure for reporting suspected abuse, and to develop written policies, for child-abuse reporting procedures. It was a start, but, as we said then, unfortunately, the law directed immediately to conduct their own inquiries rather than comply with the training. What is necessary now is to turn over cases over to the state for full investigation.

Under the new law, which takes effect July 1, school districts must adopt procedures that are to include:

- A policy that requires each district to train all schoolboard members and employees on how to report, and on how to conduct their own inquiries rather than comply with the training. What is necessary now is to turn over cases over to the state for full investigation.

- The bill stalls in the Assembly Appropriations Committee, chaired by Gatto, who feared the state cost to taxpayers was too high.

We hope that will change, especially if a similar bill introduced by state Sen. Nina Turner of Los Angeles, and now before the Senate Education Committee.

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To be sure, the new law has some shortcomings. School employees lack any training, and school employees face no penalties for failure to report. Still, if the law is to be used, school districts can use it to train their employees and to ensure that their own training.

Nevertheless, Gatto’s bill is a step in the right direction.

Under the new law, which takes effect July 1, each school district must adopt a policy to report suspected abuse to the child-abuse hotline, and to conduct their own inquiries rather than comply with the training.

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