A RAND NOTE

Linking Schools and Social Services: The Case of Child Abuse Reporting

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The research described in this report was supported by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under Grant No. 90-CA-1213.

Published by The RAND Corporation
1700 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90406-2138

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N-3226-HHS

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Coordination of schools and child protective services (CPS) agencies on child abuse reporting is required by law because school staff are mandated to report suspected maltreatment to CPS agencies. National data reveal that school staff generally comply with the reporting mandate. Although school district policy and resource limitations reinforce compliance with the reporting laws, CPS agency policies designed to limit reports and to focus resources on the most serious cases are inconsistent with district policies. As a result, school staff reports may be greeted with annoyance and rejection. The implications of this apparent conflict for child protection and for other coordination efforts are discussed.

Growing concern about limited and fragmented social services available to children has focused new attention on the need to coordinate these services and make them more accessible (e.g., Cohen 1989). Because the schools are unique in having daily contact with nearly all children, the schools figure prominently in discussions about service integration. Many view the schools as the logical hub of educational, health, and social services. In this view, the schools are or could become the natural broker of the multiple services necessary to meet children's needs and to foster their development (Farrar & Hampel, 1987; Heath & McLaughlin, 1987).

This research was funded by Grant 90-CA-1213 from the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Office of Human Development Services, Department of Health and Human Services. The author wishes to acknowledge the contributions of Robert Bell, Jill Waterman, and Judy Schneider to the research, and the contributions of Lorraine McDonnell, Shayla Lever, and Joanne Ratcliff to this article.

Linking the schools to providers of other services is not, of course, a new idea. The schools have long been involved in the provision and coordination of social and health services, including dental programs (Schlossman, Brown, & Sedlak, 1986), school social worker services (Cohen, 1989), and more recently, school-based health clinics (e.g., Kirby, 1989). For approximately 20 years, school staff have been mandated under state child-abuse reporting laws to recognize and report suspected child maltreatment to designated child protective agencies for their investigation. Exploring the nature of this enforced coordination between the schools and one child welfare agency may shed light on the potential and the limits of coordination efforts between schools and the providers of other child welfare services.

Mandated School Involvement

School staff were latecomers to the child abuse laws, a reflection of the understanding of child abuse in the early 1960s as a condition that could best be diagnosed medically (Paulsen, Parker, & Adelman, 1986). As knowledge and understanding of child

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abuse grew, it became evident that members of other professions might also be in a position to identify abuse (Fraser, 1986). Indeed, child advocates argued that some of these other discoverers might actually detect abuse earlier—before the occurrence of the severe injuries that often bring abuse to the attention of physicians.

For this reason, many considered teachers, principals, and other school staff a particularly valuable potential source of child abuse reports (Mason & Watts, 1986). Because they see children for long periods every day, school staff often know children better than do most other mandated reporters. Given daily contact or the potential for daily contact, they can detect the small but significant changes in behavior that may signal child abuse. Moreover, school staff may be the only professionals involved with poor and rural families.

For many children, a teacher or other school staff member is one of the few adults outside the family whom they know well and in whom they may feel comfortable confiding such secrets. Thus, teachers and other school personnel may be in a better position than many mandated reporters to learn directly from children about abusive situations.

Data from the first and second National Incidence Studies (NIS) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1981, 1988) indicate that school personnel are a major source of child abuse reports. Schools reported more children to child protective agencies by far than did any other investigatory (e.g., law enforcement, courts) or noninvestigatory agency (e.g., hospitals, social services) included in the studies.

Within schools, teachers are most likely to suspect maltreatment and initiate child abuse reports. Principals often expect teachers to report suspected abuse to them for their disposition, whether or not such a practice is consistent with the state's reporting law. Limited evidence suggests that in some schools this practice is common. Lombard, Michalak, and Pearlman (1986) found in their local study of schools that almost 60% of the teachers they surveyed had reported their suspicions only to their principal or assistant principal, despite a legal requirement in that state to report suspicions directly to a child protective agency. Although guidelines typically specify that the principal or other designated recipient is not to screen, investigate, or evaluate teachers' reports (Mason & Watts, 1986), it is widely believed that principals serve a gatekeeper function with regard to child abuse reports.[1]

Recent data (Zellman, 1990) indicate that school staff are committed reporters. Virtually all elementary school principals in a national sample of mandated reporters had made a child abuse report at some time, and nearly all who had ever reported had also reported in the past year. Comparable figures for secondary principals were lower, but still very high, as discussed below. Thus, it is evident that school staff are responsive to the reporting mandate. But the particulars of their behavior and its impact on the child protective agencies that receive school staff reports are unexplored. In this article, the reporting behavior of school principals is analyzed, and the response of child protective agencies to this behavior is explored.

Method

This article presents data about child abuse reporting behavior from a national study of public school principals and other mandated reporters. For coordination with a fieldwork component of the project, respondents were clustered in 15 states.[2] States were selected by using a form of stratified random sampling that permits more strata than normal and that allows units to be selected from within a stratum with unequal probabilities (Chromy, 1979). States were drawn from within strata formed on the basis of factor analysis of a number of demographic variables, including population, birth rate, and urbanicity, among others. Per capita child abuse reporting rates (American Humane Association, 1986) as to whether child abuse reports must be made to the police were also taken into account.[3] The resulting sample overrepresents the largest states by including equal numbers of states with populations under 3 million, 3 to 9.5

million, and over 9.5 million. (See Zellman & Bell, 1990, for more detail on sampling procedures.)

General and family practitioners, pediatricians, child psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and social workers were sampled from directories of their various professional organizations. Surveys were also mailed to principals of public schools and heads of child care centers sampled from commercial lists of each.[4] One thousand one hundred ninety-six professionals responded to the survey, an overall response rate of 59%.

To obtain a sample of principals representing a range of school sizes, we selected each principal with probability proportional to the square root of school size.[5] The median school size for principals who completed the survey was approximately 475 and 750 for elementary and secondary principals, respectively. A total of 267 public school principals responded to the survey. The completion rate for principals was 69%, the highest completion rate for any mandated reporter group; 57% of principals responding to the survey headed elementary schools; the remainder were secondary principals.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had ever reported child abuse or neglect and whether they had done so in the past year. Reasons for making these reports were elicited. Respondents were then asked to indicate whether they had ever suspected child abuse or neglect but had decided not to make a report. Respondents rated the importance of a number of reasons for this decision. Professional and personal background information was also collected.

Results

Reporting Behavior

Nearly all elementary school principals had reported child abuse at some time in their careers (92%). The percentage of elementary principals who had ever made a report was the highest figure for any professional group in our sample. A very high percentage of secondary principals had also made a report at some time. Elementary principals reported at the highest rate for the past 12 months as well. Report rates for the past year were more than 90% of the lifetime rate for elementary principals, and 82% of the lifetime rate for secondary principals, as shown in row 3, Table 1. In contrast, most professionals reported at far lower rates in the past year. Moreover, our data indicate that many elementary principals make multiple reports. More than 20% had reported more than five times in the past year, as shown in Table 2. These findings indicate that for public school principals, child abuse reporting is a common and continuing task.

Principals' high levels of reporting are consistent with considerable activity around these issues. Almost all principals in the sample (92%) indicated that they had discussed child abuse reporting at a staff meeting at least once in the last year, and nearly half (43%) had discussed reporting three times or more in the last 12 months (see Table 2). Eighty percent indicated that when staff members suspect abuse, they discuss these concerns with the principal. More than half indicated that sometimes they investigate these concerns themselves, while nearly half (49%) indicated that they may make the report decision on their own.

More than one third (37%) of elementary principals admitted that at some time in their career they had suspected abuse or neglect but had decided not to make a report (see row 4, Table 1). One third (34%) of secondary principals had failed to report suspected abuse at some time. Both of these percentages are below the sample mean, indicating that school principals are less likely than other mandated reporters to decide not to report their own (or a teacher's) suspicions that abuse has occurred.[6]

Influences on Reporting

The above results, combined with the higher response rate to our survey, indicate that public school principals are heavily involved with child abuse reporting, and this is particularly the case for elementary school principals. In the analyses that follow we explore some of the factors that may contribute to principals' high reporting rates.

Our data suggest that high report rates

TABLE 1
Lifetime prevalence and annual incidence of child abuse reporting and failure to report by profession (in percent)

Incidence of reporting	Elementary principals ($N = 148$)[a]	Secondary principals ($N = 112$)	Child psychiatrists ($N = 99$)	Clinical psychologists ($N = 176$)	Social workers ($N = 195$)	Pediatricians ($N = 243$)	Family general practitioners ($N = 88$)	Child care providers ($N = 109$)	Total sample ($N = 1,170$)
Ever reported child abuse or neglect[b]	91.9	83.9	89.9	63.1	69.7	89.3	75.0	50.5	77.3
Reported in last year	83.8	67.9	67.0	38.6	38.7	70.5	43.2	33.6	56.0
Percent who reported in last year/percent ever reported[c]	91.2	80.9	74.5	61.3	55.4	79.0	57.6	66.7	72.5
Ever failed to report child abuse or neglect	37.7	33.6	58.2	44.3	51.3	30.0	35.2	23.6	39.3
Failed to report in past year	23.0	23.4	32.0	22.7	27.0	17.2	19.5	13.2	22.1

[a] These sample numbers apply to row 1 and may vary slightly for other rows, depending on the amount of missing data. *N* is for past year.
[b] Cell entries represent the percentage of respondents in the specified profession who said that they had performed the behavior in question.
[c] Cell entries in this row are the percentage in each profession indicating they had reported in the last year divided by the percent indicating they had ever reported. In the case of elementary principals, the cell entry 91.2 is the result of 83.8 divided by 91.9.

among principals are not due to the fact that reporting is less difficult for them. Indeed, it has been suggested that school staff worry more than most other professionals about maintaining good relations with their school families, despite their lack of economic dependence upon them (Finkelhor, Gomes-Schwartz, & Horowitz, 1984). As shown in row 1 of Table 2, principals believe that reports carry emotional costs. When asked to rate the seriousness of a set of consequences that resulted from or that are anticipated to result from making a child abuse report, elementary and secondary principals were more likely than all other groups except child psychiatrists to rate personal upset as a very serious or somewhat serious consequence of reporting.

Principals were also quite concerned about losing rapport with a family that they report. Although family/general practitioners expressed the most concern, secondary principals equaled pediatricians and social workers in level of concern while elementary principals were close behind. When asked if the reporting process was easier for them than "for others [they've] heard about," principals fell just at the mean.

Beliefs that reports help children do not appear to explain principals' high report rates. Principals are no more likely than members of other professions to believe that reports in general are beneficial to the children who are reported. As shown in row 3 of Table 2, elementary and secondary principals were at the mean in the percentage who believed that children who are reported are more likely than not to benefit from a report. These data suggest that reporting is no easier—logistically or emotionally—for principals than for other groups, and it may, in fact, be more difficult.

Yet in some ways principals see the reporting process more favorably than do other mandated reporters. When asked about outcomes of reports for the children that they themselves have reported, principals were slightly more inclined than members of other professions to describe these outcomes as "more positive" than "others [they've] heard about" (see row 15, Table 2). Moreover, elementary principals are the most likely of all groups to report that they always get feedback from child protective services (CPS) concerning the results of investigation of cases they reported and are least likely to indicate that they never receive it (see rows 10–12, Table 2). This flow of information does, however, come at a price. Elementary and secondary principals are slightly more likely than clinical psychologists, pediatricians, and family/general practitioners to describe themselves as exerting considerable effort to receive this feedback.

Our survey data do not permit us to analyze why principals are more likely than other professionals to seek feedback on reported cases. One might hypothesize that feedback is considered more useful because children are more likely to remain in school after a report than they are to continue in therapy or to remain in a pediatrician's practice. Other data, discussed below, suggest another possible reason: Principals regard CPS agencies more highly than do other professionals and thus may regard information about case disposition as more meaningful and useful in their ongoing interaction with a child and family.

Principals most clearly distinguish themselves from members of other professions in their views of CPS agencies. Elementary principals are substantially more likely than all other groups to rate CPS expertise highly. Eighty-nine percent of elementary principals rated "bringing CPS expertise to bear" as a very important or important factor in past reporting decisions. This percentage was bested only by child care providers, who have far less contact with the CPS system. Secondary principals accorded it somewhat less importance, and mental health practitioners gave CPS expertise considerably less weight in past reporting decisions. As shown in rows 4–6 of Table 2, principals rated CPS workers most positively of all professional groups on several measures, including professionalism, consistency in their responses to reports, and responsiveness to reporters.

High levels of regard and reporting by school personnel are widely acknowledged

TABLE 2
Selected report-relevant attitudes and experiences by profession (in percent)

Attitudes and experiences	Elementary principal ($N = 149$)[a]	Secondary principal ($N = 113$)	Child psychiatrist ($N = 103$)	Clinical psychologist ($N = 181$)	Social worker ($N = 200$)	Pediatrician ($N = 248$)	Family general practitioner ($N = 91$)	Child care provider ($N = 111$)	Total sample ($N = 1,196$)
Consequences of reporting									
Personal upset	57.4[b]	59.6	60.8	50.9	55.7	56.3	48.3	31.7	53.4
Loss of rapport with family	54.2	58.6	44.9	31.5	58.6	58.6	62.1	34.6	47.1
>50% children benefit from reports[c]	22.9	24.0	23.5	23.0	24.3	18.7	27.9	28.0	23.2
Reporting attitudes/experience									
CPS worker ratings									
Professional	68.0	61.1	40.9	48.5	43.2	63.8	68.3	54.2	56.0
Consistent	41.8	43.9	20.0	29.1	27.4	38.9	39.5	40.7	34.9
Responsive	53.8	49.5	32.3	43.3	41.0	47.8	50.6	48.1	45.8
% >5 reports last 12 months	20.1	8.00	18.4	5.5	11.0	16.9	1.1	3.6	11.4
Importance in report decision									
District/workplace reporting policy	81.5	74.2	48.1	46.9	59.2	39.8	32.8	83.3	56.5
Bring CPS expertise to bear	89.0	76.9	57.1	55.6	68.6	82.6	79.7	92.5	75.4

Feedback frequency									
Always	29.5	25.3	21.2	21.9	24.5	25.1	17.9	27.8	24.5
Sometimes	56.1	53.7	52.9	46.5	54.0	47.5	40.3	24.1	48.9
Never	14.4	21.0	25.9	31.6	21.6	27.4	41.8	48.1	26.5
Considerable effort to get feedback	26.1	24.2	27.1	12.1	36.7	20.0	10.9	32.1	23.7
Own reporting experience compared with others									
% Reporting process easier for me[c]	30.9	28.3	25.9	26.3	38.8	35.9	15.4	29.4	30.8
% Child outcome more positive[c]	25.7	26.9	16.5	17.5	27.5	24.3	12.5	24.5	22.8
Reporting background									
Formal child abuse training									
None	43.0	43.2	28.4	43.8	32.6	32.0	50.0	36.4	37.8
<10 hours	43.0	48.6	35.3	32.6	29.6	28.3	37.8	45.4	35.8
10 hours or more	14.1	8.1	36.3	23.6	37.8	39.8	12.2	18.2	26.4
Confidence to treat abuse oneself									
Very	35.8	32.4	43.0	34.5	47.2	28.2	12.2	30.6	33.9
Somewhat	36.5	36.9	49.0	46.9	40.0	45.2	35.6	44.4	42.2
Not very	27.7	30.6	8.0	18.6	12.8	26.6	52.2	25.0	23.8

Note. CPS = child protective services.

[a] Numbers vary slightly with specific item. These numbers are accurate for row 7.

[b] Cell entries are percentages, indicating very strong or strong endorsement of item.

[c] χ^2 not significant at $p < .05$. All other χ^2 significant at $p < .001$.

by staff of child protective agencies but are less consistently approved. In semistructured interviews with CPS staff in six states around the country, school staff were often cited as a major problem group for CPS precisely because of their willingness to report. CPS staff frequently expressed annoyance with school staff for so often reporting cases they considered less serious because they involved neither an immediate threat to the child's life nor serious injury. Often, CPS staff noted, they concerned physical or educational neglect, two categories of abuse that are frequently assigned a low priority for investigation.[7]

In an era of increasing numbers of reports, more serious reports, and resources that continue to lag substantially behind workload (e.g., U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1988), CPS agencies everywhere are attempting to reduce the number of reports they must investigate and to find ways to reliably screen out all but the most serious cases (Zellman & Antler, 1990). With barely enough resources to deal with even these serious cases, many (and in some places most) of the calls alleging mild abuse or educational or other neglect are screened out and are not accepted as reports, or they are assigned low priority for investigation.[8] Thus, although teachers and other school staff were added to the mandated reporter category precisely because they might be able to report cases before they became serious, such reports appear to be less than enthusiastically received and are frequently rejected because they do not allege serious abuse.

Despite such treatment by CPS agencies, public school principals tend to rate their own reporting experience slightly more positively than do other mandated reporters, both in terms of the reporting process and outcomes for the children they have reported. These positive attitudes and experiences may help to overcome the slightly higher costs of reporting that principals experience as compared with members of other professions. Other background factors help to explain these patterns, as described below.

Background and Workplace Contributions to Reporting

Principals in our sample received less formal child abuse training than did members of most of the other professions in our sample (see rows 16–18, Table 2). They are especially unlikely to describe themselves as having had more than 10 hours of formal training. Interestingly, given the above, they describe themselves as feeling very confident to treat abuse at rates that equal those for clinical psychologists and that exceed those for pediatricians.

Principals were different from most other professionals in the weight they accorded to district (workplace) reporting policy in influencing their past reporting decisions. As shown in row 8 of Table 2, over 80% of elementary principals and almost three quarters of secondary principals rated district reporting policy as a very important factor in past reporting decisions. A few highly publicized prosecutions of school staff for failure to report as required by these policies have contributed, no doubt, to principals' attention to them (Lombard et al., 1986). Only child care providers, who report at low rates, accord workplace policies as much importance in reporting decisions. In contrast, workplace reporting policies were considered very important by 60% or less of the other professional groups. These lower figures for other professional groups reflect the fact that many physicians and mental health providers work in solo or group practices that lack strong reporting policies. Data reported elsewhere (Zellman & Bell, 1990) indicate that among mental health providers, those who work only in private practices are less likely to report.

These findings suggest that several factors underlie principals' greater tendencies to report suspected abuse and to do so quite regularly. Most striking is the importance nearly all attach to district reporting policies in their reporting decisions. These policies, which generally are quite explicit in requiring that school staff comply with relevant reporting statutes, clearly encourage reports. Principals also tend to describe their own reporting experiences as no more difficult

than average and the benefits to children they have reported as slightly better. Their high regard for CPS staff contributes as well. Reporting provides principals an opportunity to receive feedback from CPS staff whose opinion they value and whose input may be regarded as potentially helpful in the ongoing interaction principals anticipate with the child and family.

The striking homogeneity in the opinions and behavior of principals made it difficult to predict variations in their reporting behavior. Nevertheless, we attempted to model the reporting patterns of principals by using some of the key variables discussed above and others that we found to be important in predicting the reporting patterns of other mandated reporter groups.

To provide a clearer picture of reporting behavior, we combined the two variables that measured past-year reporting behavior into a single variable with four categories that described each respondent's reporting history: (a) no reporting and no FTR (failure to report); (b) any reporting and no FTR; (c) any reporting and any FTR; and (d) no reporting and any FTR. We named these four categories (a) no involvement, (b) consistent reporting, (c) discretion, and (d) FTR only. So few principals fell into the last category that we replaced it with a new category for them labeled "any reporting" that combined consistent reporting and discretionary reporting. Four separate models were estimated to predict the above four patterns. Each model contrasts the indicated reporting pattern with the other three patterns combined. Positive cell entries indicate that high values of the charcteristic in the designated row are associated with a higher likelihood of the occurrence of the reporting pattern in the designated column.

Knowledge of child abuse laws was assessed through response to a survey question that asked, "Under the law in your state, are people in your profession *legally obligated* to make a child abuse or neglect report when their suspicions are based on what a child says or how he acts?" Respondents who gave a "yes" response were characterized as knowledgeable, while those responding "don't know" or "no" were classified as low in knowledge.

Three attitude indices were constructed by factor analysis of survey items. Negative personal consequences of reporting were assessed through the use of a nine-item index that included a range of possible costs—for example, time lost from normal work, loss of income, loss of client/patient/student, risk of lawsuit, fear of gaining a reputation as a "reporter," parental anger, personal upset, court appearance, or loss of rapport with family. In the case of principals and child care providers, a tenth potential cost was added, "reflects negatively on my program/my leadership."

Negative CPS attitudes were based on 10 items. Eight items assessed the adequacy of CPS staff training, staff flexibility, professionalism, and the like. Two separate items asked respondents to indicate the percentage of children likely to first benefit and then to suffer from a report's being made.[9] Negative consequences to the child reported are based on four items, each presenting a problem that might result from a report: increased risk of abuse, removal of the child from the family, removal of the child from treatment or school, and other problems. On each index, high scores indicate impediments to reporting.

As shown in Table 3, we were not very successful in predicting reporting patterns, even when we combined elementary and secondary principals in an attempt to increase our predictive ability with more respondents in the equation. The homogeneity of principals' reporting patterns and the importance of district reporting policies in their reporting behavior contribute to the low proportions of variation explained. Nevertheless, some of the relationships we did uncover deserve brief comment.

We were best able to predict consistent reporting, which is what the reporting laws demand of mandated professionals. Principals who are more knowledgeable about child abuse reporting and those least likely to perceive negative personal consequences in making reports were most likely to report suspected abuse consistently. Male respond-

TABLE 3
Principals' reporting behavior as a function of workplace and reporter characteristics

Workplace and reporter characteristics	Consistent reporting ($N = 165$)	Discretion (some reports, some FTR) ($N = 165$)	Any reporting (consistent reporting and discretion) ($N = 203$)	No involvement (no reports, no FTR) ($N = 203$)
School grade level				
Elementary	0.44	−0.21	1.84	−1.82*
Jr. high/middle school	−0.28	0.33	1.22	−1.29
Senior high[a]	—	—	—	—
School size				
Under 350	−1.39	0.51	−1.02	0.21
350–550	0.26	−0.81	0.87	−1.45
550–799	−1.23	0.57	0.61	−1.44
800+[a]	—	—	—	—
School SES	0.26	−1.24	−0.79	−0.17
Years of professional experience	−1.30	1.18	−1.44	1.52
No. of staff discussions of child abuse reporting in last year				
None[a]	—	—	—	—
Once	−1.17	1.98*	0.54	0.30
Twice	−1.52	2.36*	0.91	−0.17
Three times	−0.74	1.44	0.56	0.09
Four or more times	0.06	0.77	0.60	0.21
Respondent male	1.84*	−0.93	1.36	−0.54
Confidence to treat	0.09	−0.29	−1.40	1.32
Negative personal consequences of report	−2.30*	2.45*	0.30	−0.23
Negative CPS attitudes	−0.85	0.73	−0.53	0.32
Negative consequences to child reported	−0.56	0.75	−1.37	1.87*
Child abuse reporting knowledge	3.04**	−2.13*	0.23	0.85
Formal child abuse training	−0.31	0.71	1.86*	−1.77*
R^2	0.20	0.18	0.12	0.11

Note. CPS = child protective services; FTR = failure to report; SES = socioeconomic status. Cell entries are t values.
[a] No t statistic is available for this variable because it served as the comparison for the categories preceding it.
* $p < .10$. ** $p < .01$.

ents were also more likely to report consistently.

Discretionary reporting was best predicted by the obverse of the above two variables. Respondents who perceived negative personal consequences of reports and who were least knowledgeable about child abuse reporting were most likely to engage in discretionary reporting behavior. Those who discussed child abuse reporting with staff in the past year were more likely to use discretion.

We were less successful in predicting "any reporting," a category that combines the consistent reporting and discretionary reporting groups. In this equation, only child abuse training was significantly related to the "any reporting" outcome. Those with more training were more likely to make "any" reports.

Finally, lack of involvement with child abuse reporting (no reports, no failure to report), which characterized a very small minority of principals in our sample, was best predicted by being a secondary princi-

pal, having perceptions of negative personal consequences of reporting, and having low levels of child abuse training.

Summary and Discussion

Principals are the most committed reporters in our sample. Although they are as sensitive as members of other professions to the costs of making reports, particularly personal upset and loss of rapport with the families they report, they appear more willing than members of other professions to report suspected maltreatment. One reason for their increased willingness to do so appears to lie in their more positive perceptions of CPS staff. Principals are also more likely than other groups to receive feedback on the investigations of cases they have reported, which, as many believe, contributes to more positive views of CPS and increases likelihood of future reporting. One reason for this greater feedback appears to be principals' greater willingness to exert effort to get it. Although the reasons for principals' stronger motivation for feedback were not assessed, it is likely that their higher regard for CPS expertise, discussed above, may increase the value of this information. Moreover, children who are reported are probably less likely to leave school than they are to leave a health care provider's practice. Thus, principals may value feedback more than do other mandated reporters because they anticipate continuing involvement with the reported child and family.

Another important factor in understanding principals' reporting behavior is the weight they attach to workplace (in this case, district) reporting policies. These policies are generally clear in demanding reports as the law requires. Members of other mandated reporter groups, many of whom work in private practice settings, are far less likely to operate under a clear reporting policy, and they accord those policies that do exist far less weight than do principals in their reporting decisions.

Compared with the other professional groups in our sample, principals are less likely to have received extensive formal child abuse training. Nevertheless, they generally feel at least moderately confident to actually treat cases of abuse themselves. This fairly high level of confidence, given that they do not have the clinical skills, for example, of clinical psychologists or the diagnostic skills of pediatricians, suggests that their confidence may arise from their extensive experience with children and with child abuse.

It appears that child abuse reporting knowledge, formal child abuse training, and perceptions about the personal consequences of making reports are most consistently related to patterns of reporting behavior. Those who are most knowledgeable about child abuse reporting and who are least likely to perceive that reporting will result in negative personal consequences are most likely to comply with the dictates of the reporting laws by reporting all cases of suspected abuse that come to their attention. Less knowledge, combined with perceptions that reports carry substantial personal costs, are associated with discretionary reporting, a pattern in which some suspected abuse is reported and some is not. As discussed above, very few principals in our sample had never encountered abuse. Perceptions of negative consequences for children reported and less child abuse training are associated with this statistically rare behavior pattern among principals.

These results indicate that increased child abuse knowledge, gained from more extensive formal child abuse training, would be a valuable approach to increasing report rates among principals. Reducing perceptions of the negative personal consequences of reports might also be helpful but far more difficult.

This generally positive picture of the reporting patterns of public school principals stands in some contrast to findings reported in the new National Incidence Study (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1988) concerning school staff reporting behavior and to CPS perceptions of school staff behavior elicited in the course of field interviews for this study. Data from the NIS indicate that although public schools are the single largest source of cases countable under study definitions, the proportion of recog-

nized cases that are reported to and accepted by CPS from public schools is quite low. In fact, more countable cases identified in public schools fell into the unreported and/or unaccepted category than into the reported and accepted group (pp. 6–15). As the NIS notes, screening out of cases by CPS agencies prior to investigation tends to reduce actual reporting rates to CPS. This, no doubt, contributes to the findings of low report rates for schools, as discussed above.

Yet school staff were added to the reporting laws precisely because they were perceived to be in a position to identify abuse and neglect before it resulted in the sorts of serious physical injuries that are frequently referred to doctors and hospitals. Some CPS staff whom we interviewed acknowledged that at a time when child abuse reporting is highly salient and school staff have been prosecuted for failure to report in several states, one cannot blame school staff for making many reports, even of less serious abuse. Moreover, as district budgets shrink, the kinds of people (e.g., school nurses or school psychologists) to whom teachers and principals have turned in the past for advice or solutions to some of the least serious cases—for example, lack of clothing or supervision—no longer exist or are funded only on a part-time basis. With few or no other available resources, they turn to CPS because they feel compelled to tell *someone* about their concerns.

These CPS reactions cast a shadow on the active reporting behavior of school principals. One must wonder how long principals will continue to report so actively if their reports encounter CPS animosity and are screened out at high rates. Although frustration concerning lack of school-based services and high esteem for CPS appear to be motivating reports, lack of responsiveness by CPS, over time, may cause this most dedicated group of reporters to begin to question their behavior.

Implications

These findings raise real concerns about the ability of child protective agencies and the schools to interact effectively to protect children. In both agencies, there are clear policies about how to handle child abuse reports, but these policies are in apparent conflict. In most districts there exist written statements that staff are expected to report all suspected maltreatment. Highly visible prosecutions of a few educators for failure to report reinforce these policies. Limited noninstructional services staff reduce available options to making reports. In CPS agencies, the need to limit caseloads in the face of growing numbers of reports and inadequate resources has produced both policies and procedures designed to reduce the number of reports accepted and to focus resources on the most serious cases. These most serious cases appear not to be reported by school staff.

There is a striking lack of communication between the schools and CPS agencies about their own institutional imperatives and their expectations of each other. Although limited efforts at higher level interagency communication about child abuse reporting have been attempted in a few communities, most communication occurs between individual reporters and CPS line workers concerning individual cases. Law and policy that sharply limit (or are perceived to limit) the kind and amount of information that may be disclosed in these interactions (e.g., Conte, 1988; Leaner, 1988) frustrate interagency communication, contribute to feelings on the part of reporters that CPS staff unreasonably withhold information, and render meaningless the opportunity that these interactions present to educate reporters about CPS priorities.

The lack of communication between CPS agencies and mandated reporters and the lack of clarity about what CPS agencies expect of school and other agency staff have led to repeated calls for written guidelines about what should be—and what should not be—reported (e.g., Besharov, 1988; Meriwether, 1986). These calls have not been heeded, in large part, because the development of such guidelines depends upon reaching a consensus about what level of specificity and type of information they should contain. In the absence of commu-

nication or guidelines, the relationship between CPS agencies and the schools frustrates both sides and contributes far less than it might to helping identify and protect abused children.

The difficulties that the schools experience in their interaction with CPS agencies regarding child abuse reporting contain some lessons for those interested in encouraging interagency cooperation in the provision of social services to children. Although this relationship is unique in being compelled by law, understanding the consequences of that compulsion may nevertheless be useful in illuminating ways to facilitate other voluntary interagency relationships.

It was the state legislatures, not the schools and CPS, who decided that their relationship was necessary. The reporting laws which required school staff to report suspected maltreatment to child protective agencies for their investigation precluded the kinds of discussions that are critical for effective interagency interaction. Neither agency asked or answered such questions as these: "Does this interaction make sense?" "Under what circumstances?" "On what kinds of problems can we best collaborate?" "Which problems are most appropriately handled by the schools, by CPS, by another agency?" These questions are critical to the establishment of a productive, collaborative relationship between two (or more) agencies.

Because the relationship was established by others, no mechanisms were built in to encourage the two agencies to learn of or stay informed about changes in goals, needs, or priorities in each institution. Had such mechanisms existed, the schools might have learned early that CPS differs in important ways from the schools in how they view families and their involvement with them. Given our ambivalence as a society about intervening in families, CPS is constrained to become involved only when the need is compelling and to withdraw from families as soon as there is some confidence that the child is no longer at risk. In contrast, the schools, and particularly the elementary schools, are freer to become involved—and stay involved—with the whole child and his or her family. Such an understanding would have made it easier for school staff to accept the apparent ease with which CPS terminates a relationship with a family and appears unresponsive to school staff requests for help and support in the ongoing relationship that schools often have with a troubled child.

Continuing discussions between CPS and the schools also would have alerted school staff to the fact that CPS staff were reeling under the volume of calls that they were receiving and that they were actively, if reluctantly, seeking ways to control workload. School staff might also have learned that they were increasingly being viewed as obstacles to CPS' achievement of its protective mission. Had they known and had the parameters of the interaction not been set by others, as discussed below, the schools might reasonably have asked, "What does this mean for our collaboration? What needs to change in the way that we interact?" "Are our expectations for the kinds of cases that you [CPS] can handle unrealistic?" "What can we do to resolve the apparent conflict between our mandate to report all suspected maltreatment and your need to conserve resources for the most serious cases?"

The parameters of the school–CPS interaction were also set by those outside the relationship. The law required that these agencies interact on the basis of reports that school staff were mandated to make. If these reports were not made, school staff could and presumably would be prosecuted for failure to report. Although many have urged other less formal forms of interaction, such as consultation about specific cases, currently anything less than a report does not meet the law's requirements.

The reporting mandate, while criticized by some in the professions, was widely understood as necessary to brook ignorance and resistance to reporting. But as reports are increasingly rejected and as substantiated cases are frequently not provided any services, reporter resentment has grown. The costs of making reports are not being balanced by benefits to the children reported. A sense of such balance is critical to a con-

tinuing, voluntary interagency collaboration. Although staff in both agencies recognize that some costs are inevitable in establishing and maintaining a collaborative relationship, the incentive to continue it will soon be lost if benefits to children are not apparent and do not appear to exceed those that could be achieved in the absence of collaboration.

The roles of the schools and CPS remain unclear in some respects. Certainly, the schools function as the identifier of abuse, and CPS as the investigator and decision-maker with regard to the provision of services. But is the schools' role strictly limited to identification of suspected maltreatment? As professionals who may know the child and family far better than does CPS staff, is some involvement in disposition and treatment decisions sometimes appropriate? Can the schools expect—even demand—some feedback if they must continue to work with a child and family who have been reported? Doesn't it make sense to share such information? Frustration about their circumscribed role is evident among school staff and is manifested in the considerable efforts principals make to receive feedback about reported cases. Clarification of the roles of each agency engaged in any collaborative effort is crucial in avoiding such frustrations. Will one agency serve as the lead agency? Who becomes responsible for case planning? Who provides and receives feedback and under what circumstances? Are there agency regulations that preclude the kinds of information exchange considered crucial to maintain the interagency collaboration being advocated? Such questions addressed early will help to establish relationships of trust and value.

To a significant extent, the problems that have been identified in the interaction between the schools and CPS with regard to child abuse reporting are the results of a relationship forced upon both agencies. Faced with an externally imposed mandate to interact, they devoted no efforts to asking and resolving a number of questions that are critical to establishing a collaborative, voluntary relationship of some duration. These unasked questions and unresolved issues should be instructive to those advocating enduring, voluntary interagency collaborations designed to bring needed services to children.

Notes

[1] Several of the educators to whom we spoke in the course of pretesting our survey instrument (described below) believed that principals may choose not to report in specific instances out of concern that reports reflect negatively on the school or on their own leadership. A survey item that asked principals to rate the seriousness of a number of consequences of actual or anticipated reporting revealed that fewer than 10% considered "reflects negatively on my school/my leadership" a very serious or somewhat serious consequence of reporting. In comparison, 58% of principals considered personal upset a very serious or somewhat serious consequence of making a report.

[2] Fieldwork interviews focused on the policies and operations of child protective agencies and their relationships with mandated reporters. Fieldwork in schools around these issues, which was not a part of this study, would provide important contextual data that would expand our understanding of school staff reporting behavior.

[3] This variable was selected because of substantial variation across states and because we believed it might influence the inclination to report.

[4] We selected principals rather than teachers for inclusion in our sample because they are believed to serve a gatekeeper function with regard to child abuse reports, as discussed above.

[5] This selection procedure represents a compromise between two extreme and incompatible sampling goals: (a) representing all public schools equally and (b) representing the population of all public school students. We rejected both of these goals because in the first case the resulting sample would overrepresent principals in very small schools whose reporting behavior would affect relatively few students; in the second case the resulting sample would include very few small schools and would thus be too truncated to allow us to adequately examine the effects of school size on reporting behavior.

[6] One possible reason for lower rates of failure to report among principals may be due to their different relationship to suspected maltreatment. Unlike other professionals in our sample, principals almost always learn of suspected maltreatment second hand from teachers or other staff. If

staff prescreen, this could reduce rates of failure to report among principals.

[7] In some states, educational neglect is not a part of CPS agencies' mission. In several agencies we visited, staff were uncertain about whether educational neglect was an agency responsibility, or the issue was under discussion.

[8] In many CPS agencies, the press of more serious reports results in failure to ever respond to the lowest ranked cases. (See Zellman & Bell, 1990, for more detail on this point.)

[9] Because these items did not share a common range, we standardized the variables before taking the average.

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