There have been several recent reports about past sexual abuse at a number of private schools. The abuse of a minor is repugnant; it violates the profound and sacred dignity of a child. When a school employee perpetrates abuse, it represents a complete betrayal of the trust parents and students place in educators. Our hearts go out to victims everywhere, whether the abuse occurred four months or forty years ago. At TABS these points are the basic pillars of our approach to the situation facing schools today.

**Educator sexual misconduct is a national problem affecting all types of schools.**

According to the best research available, an estimated 9.6% of all U.S. students—nearly one in 10—will experience some form of educator sexual misconduct between kindergarten and twelfth grade. We support efforts to shed additional light on this serious problem.

There is no scholarly research we can locate that compares misconduct by school type or that suggests boarding schools or private independent schools are at greater risk for these incidents. Nevertheless, our schools have certainly not been immune to this terrible blight, as recent cases and news reports make painfully evident. Many of our schools are high-profile, long-standing institutions, and they accept that they will thus be subject to high public scrutiny when misconduct occurs.

In any case, every educator and school leader has a responsibility within the scope of his or her powers, to reduce abuse and to thwart would-be abusers. Beyond the absolute duty to report credible allegations of child abuse to the proper authorities, schools also have a general ethical duty, when possible, to share established facts about educator misconduct with future prospective employers. In practice, however, this ethical duty is sometimes complicated by various legal considerations and practical challenges. Likewise, schools in their hiring practices must be assiduous in screening new employees, not only in terms of criminal history but in documenting a candidate’s employment history and collecting thorough references.

**Schools must respond to survivors with the utmost compassion and justice.**

We recognize that it takes a great deal of courage for survivors to step forward and to report abuse, and schools must be supportive and responsive. While survivors may share a sense of pain and betrayal that can have lifelong effects, no two victims are precisely the same, and their needs and expectations may differ. Therefore, the principles of compassion and justice may require somewhat distinct applications on a case-by-case basis.

For the safety and security of the broader school constituency, transparency is a basic rule of thumb, and it is often—though not always—possible to share important information about the misconduct and the offender while simultaneously preserving the anonymity of the victim or victims. Throughout, we should never lose sight of the primary tragedy—the one suffered by the victims of abuse or misconduct.

However, it is also true that when abuse occurs in a school, there are collateral tragedies borne by the entire community: A generalized erosion of trust among students and families; a pall of unjustified suspicion over a school’s other educators who in many cases have dedicated their lives faithfully, even heroically, to teach and mentor students; and a sense of shared disorientation, failure, and injury affecting every member of a school’s extended family.
There is no private school conspiracy.

There have been suggestions in some media reports that sexual misconduct in private schools echoes the Catholic Church scandal.

Certainly, the malicious and calculated behavior of abusers—and the deep pain and damage visited upon victims—are found in both reports, as they are in virtually any account of sexual abuse of a young person by a trusted adult.

There are meaningful structural differences, however.

In the case of the Catholic Church the Boston Globe’s Spotlight team uncovered a hierarchical organization—with authority consolidated in the person of the bishop or cardinal—willfully and deliberately moving known abusers from parish to parish, methodically protecting abusers as they continued to prey on the innocent. In addition, the offending bishops systematically failed (or frequently, refused) to report allegations to the proper criminal authorities, often hiding behind ecclesial privilege.

In the U.S. alone, there are thousands of private independent schools, and hundreds of college prep boarding schools. Each school is a separate and distinct institution, with its own mission, history, governing board, management, budget, faculty, staff, and student body.

This is not to suggest that private schools are above reproach. Without question, there are many cases in which private school leaders failed to notify the larger school community about the reasons for an offending employee’s dismissal. There are also a number of documented instances in which a school failed to inform a future employer—when it had the means and opportunity to do so—about credible sexual misconduct allegations or findings of fact regarding a former employee. Since mandatory reporting laws were enacted over the last couple of decades, it’s been considerably less common, albeit inexcusable, for a private independent school leader to have received reasonable allegations of abuse and to have failed to notify the proper authorities.

Most troubling of all, of course, are those specific institutions where a confluence of factors—cultural dysfunction, inadequate policy, insufficient training, poor executive leadership, and/or ineffective governance—have given rise to a pattern of abuse, sometimes with multiple offenders and multiple victims over an extended period of time. These situations, though few, shock the conscience—and rightly so.

But it is important to note that there is no evidence of a conspiracy or tacit agreement among private independent schools to defy mandatory reporting requirements or to harbor abusers. Moreover, there is simply no central authority controlling the hiring, supervision, or movement of employees among and between schools. Each school is its own entity.

To be clear: any act of abuse is horrific. Any instance in which a school, private or public, is derelict in meeting its obligations to student safety represents a shameful failure. The Boston Globe and other media perform a service when they shine a light on abuse and on institutional deficiencies in preventing abuse. Nevertheless, the importance of the story and the sobering assemblage of documented failures and missteps do not relieve the media from the obligation to make balanced assessments and to resist sweeping generalizations or categorical claims about a very large and varied group of schools, schools which in fact are remarkably diverse in purpose, size, location, grades served, etc.
Private independent schools—all schools, in fact—must continue to improve policies, procedures, and practices to eliminate abusers and abuse from our communities. Schools that fail to do so should be held to account. Moreover, organizations and associations that support private independent schools must work to study and understand as fully as possible the institutional factors that may elevate the odds of abuse or that may dissuade victims or whistleblowers from coming forward.

*Private schools and organizations are doing more than ever, yet we must redouble our efforts.*

Undoubtedly, over the last number of years, all of us in education have become better informed about the signs and structures of sexual abuse. Boarding schools, private independent schools, and the organizations supporting them have made real and significant progress in preventing and responding to sexual misconduct. Among other approaches, schools made their faculty and staff handbooks clearer and more forceful, strengthened background checks for employees and volunteers, and instituted relevant training for employees and even students. Some schools subscribe to 24/7 telephone and internet tip lines, where anonymity is guaranteed, and many others offer safe spaces on campus or ombudsperson services where confidential conversation is guaranteed.

Schools have also focused on building healthy communities and cultures. While never an absolute failsafe, a healthy culture is an important factor in preventing abuse of any kind. Nevertheless, one case is one too many. Schools must improve in their ongoing efforts to prevent misconduct and to respond legally, ethically, swiftly, and transparently when incidents of misconduct come to their attention. This is the approach that TABS has attempted to take and encouraged its schools to take.

Moreover, given the proud history of prep boarding schools and the community’s long-standing commitment to excellence, we have a shared responsibility to set the standard for school safety—not merely to comply with baseline requirements—and to contribute to broader national and international solutions.

For its part, TABS—like a number of other educational associations—hosts experts offering pertinent workshops at its various conferences, symposia, and webinars. We’ve run more than forty (40) such sessions over the last decade, but we, too, must do more. As a first expression of our intensified commitment, TABS is establishing a Task Force to take a 360-degree view of the issues and to develop a more comprehensive set of recommendations, resources, and programs to assist schools in their efforts to prevent sexual misconduct and to respond effectively to cases of sexual misconduct. The Task Force will include school leaders, TABS staff and Board members, subject matter experts, and representatives from the survivor community.

We’re also launching a new program with the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) this October. Covering a broad range of risk, safety, and legal issues for schools, the inaugural program will include a special one-day focus on sexual misconduct.

The sexual violation of children is a national problem. Any school, camp, adventure-based program, scout troop, or youth group is potentially vulnerable. The problem requires comprehensive, system-wide approaches spanning the public and private sectors. TABS will seek opportunities to connect and partner with other educational organizations in pursuit of greater understanding, effective practice, and cooperation in this area.

Please direct media inquiries to Annie Lundahl.