

## **Parents: Harassment on Pocono Mountain school bus continues**

### **Pocono Mountain officials say alleged misbehavior has been dealt with**

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BLAKESLEE — Parents are pressing the Pocono Mountain School District to step up punishment, saying that their grade-school daughters have been sexually harassed by boys on the school bus.

For Kelly Tompkins, the problem first became evident last month when her third-grade daughter got off the bus from Tobyhanna Elementary Center.

"What's a whore?" the girl asked, according to her mother.

Why, she wanted to know.

"The boys kept calling me that," Tompkins said her daughter told her.

Tompkins was stunned. "The words that were coming out of her mouth I couldn't believe," she said.

The girl's complaint was one of several accounts of alleged sexual harassment that she and others on the bus say were carried out by a handful of boys. They allege that four grade-school boys have been bullying and harassing students over a period of months.

"The bullying I can see," Tompkins said on Tuesday. "The constant sexual harassment has got to stop. My daughter is 9 years old and she's already feeling humiliated by this."

But the district says it has done everything possible to address concerns that have been brought to its attention and that it can substantiate.

"Our administrators at Tobyhanna Elementary Center have dealt with each misbehavior on the bus immediately when they found out about it," Wendy Fable, the district's director of public information, said via e-mail. "Each situation has been investigated, and there have been consequences for any student who has misbehaved on the bus."

Student confidentiality laws and district policies forbid Pocono Mountain from telling parents exactly how they have disciplined other people's children.

"The main complaint now seems to be that unless parents know what actions were taken against other people's children, they do not believe we took any action," Fable said. "The most we can offer is an explanation of the steps we are taking and our assurances that disciplinary measures were and are taken for such misbehavior."

"Nothing has been ignored," she said.

Parents of the alleged victims say the consequences have come too late and proven largely ineffective. They said four boys have been moved to different seats, but that the behavior did not change. Some parents have started driving their children to school.

"No matter where they're moved, they're a problem," said Alicia Siglin, who says her daughter, 8, has been repeatedly harassed. "We want them off the bus."

The district says that it has used "progressive discipline measures" to deal with any misbehavior, based on the seriousness of the actions. "It's very important to remember that most of these students are first and second graders," Frable said.

The district's sexual harassment policy says students found guilty of committing it are subject to a range of discipline "up to and including expulsion," depending on the severity, effect and other factors.

Several parents gave similar accounts of the alleged misbehavior. Some have said their children told them that the boys taunted their daughters, referring to information about sex that they read on the Internet or saw in their parents' X-rated video collections. They purportedly told the girls they would hold them down and have sex with them, or they simulated sex.

"I'd expect this on a middle school bus," Margaret Brouzis, a parent of a daughter on the bus, said at the bus stop at Brier Crest Woods. "But this is elementary school."

Some of the accounts have been graphic, including claims that one boy dropped his pants and underpants, and told the girls he would take them home and "hump" them.

Frable said the school's assistant principal, Phyllis Cournan, who is also a former FBI agent, investigated. She interviewed the bus driver, the students involved and those nearby. It produced a different narrative.

The boy was apparently wearing loose-fitting clothes and his pants slipped or were pulled down, exposing a few inches of his boxer shorts. "By every account given on this there was no nudity," Frable said. "The graphic details seem to be expanding each time I hear of this."

She added that the accounts that the children have given to parents have differed from what they told the building administrators. "We are dealing with young children, and their stories do change," she said.

But Dr. Andi Taroli, medical director of the Pegasus Child Advocacy Center, said children's accounts of this sort of behavior are rarely invented.

"For any kid of that age to use words like that, they've had to have heard them somewhere," said Taroli, a specialist in the field of child abuse and forensic pediatrics. "A kid just doesn't make this up."

She said that the use of sexually charged language at such a young age normally raises concerns that children are not just hearing those words, but possibly exposed to sexual behavior, or even abused.

"It's definitely a red flag," she said.

The district said it shared that concern.

"Any time a very young child uses foul or sexually graphic language, we worry about where they heard the language," Frable said.

The district recently installed a video camera in the back of the bus and placed a monitor on board, and changed the seating assignments, which stopped the problem, by many reports.

Letters also went home asking parents to reinforce proper behavior on the bus.

The school's assistant principal talked to all of the students on the bus, though some parents complained that the delivery was heavy-handed, and did more to scare the children who were the victims than dissuade the alleged bullies.

The district and several parents met on Thursday. One parent who attended expressed concern that the monitor and camera in the rear were temporary, and that the issues would start happening again.

