

Published May 19, 2011  
Published Thursday May 19, 2011

## OPS didn't report abuse allegations

By [Jonathon Braden](#) and [Jason Kuiper](#)  
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITERS



Shad M. Knutson

In December 2008, a 13-year-old girl reported that her teacher at an Omaha middle school touched her sexually and asked her for sex in exchange for a better grade.

She rejected her teacher's advances, told her mom and reported the incident to school officials.

But Omaha Public Schools officials did not report the allegations to authorities, despite a state statute that requires notification of suspected abuse.

Instead, OPS did its own investigation, and, ultimately, allowed teacher Shad M. Knutson to return to the classroom at Nathan Hale Middle School.

Over the next two years, two more allegations surfaced against Knutson, and OPS — again and again — handled the matters internally.

Now Knutson faces three felony counts of third-degree sexual assault of a child stemming from the three allegations.

It was a parent — not OPS — who notified Child Protective Services about the alleged abuse and brought about an Omaha Police investigation.

Deputy Douglas County Attorney Brenda Beadle said she finds OPS's actions regarding Knutson "troubling."

"Any time you don't report child abuse going on, especially in a school situation, obviously, that's very concerning," she said.

State law requires that suspected child abuse or neglect be reported to the proper law enforcement agency or the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

Under the statute, school employees, medical professionals and others are required to make a report if there's "reasonable cause to believe that a child has been subjected to child abuse or neglect."

Janice Garnett, the district's assistant superintendent for human resources, said the complaints against Knutson didn't have to be reported because district officials were unable to prove the allegations.

"We didn't have any facts to substantiate that there was child abuse taking place," she said.

However, Jeanne Atkinson, a spokeswoman for HHS, said the state law requires that officials report any suspected abuse, whether it's been proved or not.

"Other people will investigate it and see if it's substantiated or not," Atkinson said.

Failing to report child abuse is a misdemeanor and carries a maximum penalty of three months in jail, a \$500 fine or both.

It would be up to the Douglas County Attorney's Office to determine whether to file charges.

Beadle said her office is looking into OPS's actions. "We need more time to investigate," she said.

On Wednesday, Knutson made his first court appearance on the three felony charges and was ordered held on \$500,000 bail.

After the court appearance, family members of Knutson left the Douglas County Jail without commenting. Knutson posted bail later in the day.

Knutson, who taught eighth-grade social studies, also had been an assistant girls basketball coach.

Omaha Police started its investigation into Knutson after a mother of one of the alleged victims contacted Child Protective Services on Oct. 22, 2010.

The alleged victim, a 14-year-old girl, told police of an incident earlier that month, according to a police search warrant for school records. The girl said Knutson touched her breasts and asked her not to tell anyone. He told the girl she could "touch my private part any time" and also told her not to worry if she didn't complete a test in time because he could "give her the grade."

The girl also provided police with the names of other possible victims. The girl's account led to one of the charges against Knutson.

The mom, when reached by phone Wednesday, declined to comment.

A second girl told police that in 2009 Knutson brushed his hands against her breasts, according to the search warrant. The girl reported that at first she liked the attention, but it later started "bugging her because of his age." That girl's account led to another charge against Knutson.

The third count came after police subpoenaed OPS personnel records and staff files related to Knutson. The files contained the name of the girl who said Knutson asked her for sex in exchange for a grade in December 2008.

In total, the search warrant contained interviews with eight girls — two of whom didn't report any inappropriate comments or touching by Knutson.

Garnett said Knutson was placed on temporary paid administrative leave during parts of 2008, 2009 and 2010 as the district looked into the allegations.

In October 2010, Knutson was placed on leave and was to remain out of the classroom until police finished their investigation, said OPS spokeswoman Luanne Nelson.

In April, the district told Knutson that his contract would not be renewed for the coming school year, and by the end of that month, Knutson had officially resigned.

Contact the writer:

402-444-1074, jonathon.braden@owh.com

---

Copyright ©2011 Omaha World-Herald®. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, displayed or redistributed for any purpose without permission from the Omaha World-Herald.