

I have two children at Severna Park Elementary school, and my daughter was the student of a teacher who was investigated, charged, and later acquitted of dozens of sexual abuse charges. When the school was first notified about the first child victim, the teacher was immediately put on leave, and I didn't think anything of it. A few weeks later, however, a parent discovered another child had written to a friend alluding to also being sexually abused.

I received a phone call from another mom telling me that there was an investigation underway for sexual abuse and that I needed to ask my daughter what she had experienced in his classroom. Over the next several days, I learned of at least six children, whom I know personally, who had to make reports to CPS, as well as many, many others beyond our friend circle and in other grades. To say the least, it was a traumatic experience to try to navigate for the entire community.

Some parents got together and took it upon themselves to organize two events – one with a local therapeutic provider in our community and another with a child sexual abuse advocacy organization, based in Baltimore. Both sessions were incredibly useful, and we learned how to talk about the subject with an 8 year old, what types of therapeutic treatments are most beneficial, as well as how the criminal legal process works. There is a real tension between managing the therapeutic response, which is an urgent and immediate need, and the criminal response, which is a years long process.

To advertise these sessions, the parents had to self organize, gather up email addresses, and depend on word of mouth. We were not allowed to work with the school, or even the PTO, to educate ourselves on this topic.

Unfortunately for our community, working with the school felt like an adversarial experience, because their policies and procedures forbid them from saying anything about anything – nothing about the nature of the allegation, nothing that my daughter may have been in real danger in her 3rd grade classroom, and nothing for families about how to deal with the situation to move forward in the context of sexual abuse. Although I understand and support the need to protect the rights of the accused, this cannot supersede ensuring the safety and well-being of our children and families.

Please vote in support of SB 685, so that schools and communities have better tools, resources, and support to respond to these types of tragic events in the future.