

School Sex Scandals

Three recent arrests of female teachers have alarmed Florida residents, but experts question whether there's been an uptick of cases.



TEACHERS IN TROUBLE: (left to right) Ragusa, Spack and Marinelli

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It was an alarming cluster of cases. On March 13, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office in Florida arrested [Tampa](#) middle school teacher [Stephanie Ragusa](#), 28, for allegedly having sex with a 14-year-old boy in her apartment and in the back seat of her Lexus. One week later, the Tampa Police Department charged Mary Jo Spack, 45, a local high school teacher, with having sex with a 17-year-old male student. That encounter reportedly took place in a motel room, where she had been drinking alcohol with a group of the teen's friends, according to officials. Four days later, yet another case surfaced: [Lisa Marinelli](#), 40, a substitute teacher from the [Tampa Bay](#) area, was arrested by the Pasco County Sheriff's Office for allegedly having sex with a 17-year-old boy on 10 different occasions, mostly in her car.

The rash of arrests, which appears coincidental, has nevertheless unsettled area residents. They're no strangers to such scandals. Since 2005, the Tampa Bay area has been home to 10 similar cases involving schoolteachers, including these most recent ones. Among them: that of Debra LaFave, the blonde middle school teacher who admitted to sleeping with a 14-year-old boy in 2004 and whose case sparked a national media frenzy (she was sentenced to three years of house arrest and seven years of probation). In response to the most recent incidents, local and state officials are taking action. The Hillsborough County School District is launching a review of its hiring policies, and a pair of state legislative bills addressing teacher ethics is gaining additional traction.

Authorities say they have strong evidence to back up the charges against the three women. Investigators monitored a phone call between Ragusa and the 14-year-old in which she acknowledged having sex with the boy, according to the sheriff's office. Spack's alleged sexual encounter was overheard by the 17-year-old's friends in the motel room. And in Marinelli's case, authorities got hold of a pair of underwear she allegedly gave her victim, as well as explicit text messages sent from her cell phone. "How about a quickie 2 morrow afternoon :-)" one read, according to an affidavit. "Ur car looks awesome! Al u need is a hot milf sittin next u and ud really b in business," read another.

Ragusa has been charged with lewd and lascivious battery, and Spack and Marinelli with unlawful sex with a minor. All three are now out on bail. Marinelli's attorney declined to comment, and lawyers for Ragusa and Spack didn't return repeated calls seeking comment.

For Ragusa, this isn't her first brush with the law. In 2004, she was arrested for aggravated battery, though the charge was later dropped. The following year, Tampa police arrested her on suspicion of driving under the influence, and she refused to take a breath alcohol test; the charge was dismissed at trial. She also ran into trouble with school authorities. According to [Linda Cobbe](#), spokesperson for Hillsborough County schools, Ragusa was investigated by the Florida Department of Children and Families for inappropriately restraining a student who was attempting to leave her classroom; no charges were filed. She was also on probation with the school board for using inappropriate language and discussing her personal life with students. "I think she has some boundary issues," says Cobbe.

The case against Spack, however, came as a shock to those who know her. "There were no problems ever in her history as a teacher," says Cobbe. "Everything was the highest marks you could receive. Nothing needed working on. She helped develop the district development exams, she was boisterous and outgoing and known for making her classes interesting." It's a description echoed by Christie Gold, head of the English department at Freedom High School, where Spack taught honors English. "We're all stunned," she says. "It's been a week and I still can't wrap my brain around it."

As a substitute teacher who recently entered the field, Marinelli wasn't as well known. She passed a background check when she applied for work last August, says Renalia DuBose, assistant superintendent for Pasco County schools. In an article in the St. Petersburg Times, Marinelli's family members denied that she had a sexual relationship with the student and claimed she was simply trying to help him with problems at home. (Contacted at home by NEWSWEEK, Marinelli's mother-in-law declined to comment on the report.)

The spate of cases prompted the Hillsborough County school board to schedule a meeting on April 15 to discuss background checks, hiring procedures and training. "I think they are going to find that we do all we can possibly do under our financial constraints to identify if [applicants] have had something in their past," says Cobbe. "I

don't know if they will suggest psychological testing, but I don't think we could afford to do it." As far as training, Cobbe says the district requires new hires to take courses in professionalism and integrity that advise teachers against getting too chummy with students. Due to recent events, the district's manager of staff development will likely recommend refresher courses, according to Cobbe. (The Pasco County school district has no similar review planned. "We have a very rigorous training program and talk to [teachers] about various issues," says DuBose.)

The cases may also help push along two bills moving through the state legislature. On Thursday, the state Senate unanimously passed a teacher ethics measure that would increase penalties against abusive educators and require the state to help schools develop ethics policies. One of the inspirations for the bill, according to one of its sponsors, was a 2007 investigation by the Sarasota Herald-Tribune into lapses in the way the Florida Department of Education handled abuse allegations. Separately, the Senate passed another measure earlier this month that would urge the U.S. Congress to support a national clearinghouse for reports of educator misconduct.

Not everyone has reacted to the sex cases with concern. As usual with liaisons involving female teachers and male students, there's been a fair amount of high-fiving and bawdy humor. In the online commentary following local news stories, plenty of respondents have applauded the boys for fulfilling a supposed male fantasy. The Buckethead Show on the 98 Rock radio station has established a "school pool" in which listeners can win prizes for correctly guessing the site of the next sex scandal. The game's promotion line: "We'll give you the cash for new school supplies and maybe some 'private tutoring' of your own ;-)." The show has even recorded a song called "Mr. I'm 17 But Still Underage Teacher Porker."

Yet that sort of trivialization worries experts in sexual abuse. "Female sex predation is not a victimless crime," says [Gordon Finley](#), a psychologist and professor at Florida International University in Miami. "It is male victimization. They suffer to some degree the same consequences as female victims." Though a 2004 U.S. Department of Education study showed that 43 percent of sexual abusers in the education system were women, there's a paucity of research on female sexual abusers, says Finley. "Male sexual predators have always been around, and we've paid a lot of attention to them. We need to say, 'Wake up, America.'" In his view, the reported cases are just the "tip of the iceberg."

It may be that teacher/student cases are simply being reported more, says David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. He notes that substantiated child sex abuse cases declined 51 percent between 1992 and 2005, according to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, a federal database.

He draws distinctions between male and female sex offenders. "Attraction to prepubescent kids is very rare among females," he says. "You almost exclusively see adult women involved with teenagers." And, he adds, "you will find women are less

likely to be using coercion." Whether their motivations differ markedly from those of men isn't clear; there simply isn't enough research out there, according to Finkelhor. Which leads him to the same conclusion as Finley: the need for more studies. Only in that way can school administrators and parents gain a better understanding of what compels some educators to act so recklessly.