

# The New York Times

## Between Teacher and Student: The Suspicions Are Growing

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TEANECK, N.J., June 13 — The accusation could not have been lodged against a more respected or popular educator: James Darden, an eighth-grade English teacher who was honored with a school assembly last year after winning a prestigious teaching award. Yet this month, Mr. Darden was charged with aggravated sexual assault after a woman, now 21, told prosecutors that from the ages of 13 to 15 she and Mr. Darden, who is now 36, had sex in his house, his car, his classroom and the men's bathroom at [Thomas Jefferson Middle School](#). He has pleaded not guilty. Days earlier, two 28-year-old female teachers at a therapeutic school for emotionally disturbed and neglected boys in New Windsor, N.Y., were charged with having sexual relations with two 16-year-old students.

These cases and scores of others reflect a growing public consciousness of improper sexual relations between teachers and students. And although federal statistics show that reported sex crimes aimed at young people in general — whether at the hands of middle school teachers, parish priests or relatives — have fallen nationwide since the early 1990s, New York State has reported a marked increase in a broader but similar category, what are called moral-fitness cases, involving certified teachers and administrators. A recent State Education Department study said that the number of those cases has almost tripled in recent years, and that the clear majority of complaints were sex-related. New Jersey does not keep similar statistics. Education experts and law enforcement

officials speculate that since hundreds of instances of sexual abuse by Catholic priests have come to light in the past several years, resulting in millions of dollars in lawsuit settlements and judgments, victims are more willing to report unwanted encounters. In addition, they say, schools have clearer guidelines about informing law enforcement authorities, and an influx of women into the ranks of prosecutors may have led to stepped-up enforcement. “Most of what we are seeing is a greater level of sensitization, awareness and willingness to report and prosecute,” said David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the [University of New Hampshire](#). “There has also been a feminization of law enforcement. One of the consequences of that

was to challenge a longstanding reluctance to prosecute crimes that involve adult women and what look like willing teenage boys.” The dearth of national data on reports of student abuse at the hands of educators is the result of its wide-ranging nature: a spectrum of misdeeds, from lewd remarks to actual sex, and a range of overlapping responses. There are school disciplinary proceedings, state hearings to revoke certification and criminal prosecution. And many cases simply quietly disappear. “There’s no official accounting or record-keeping of this,” said Nan Stein, senior research scientist at the Centers for Women at Wellesley College, who has often testified as an expert in cases involving sex-assault charges against teachers. “When cases are settled out of court, it’s very hard to find information.” One 2000 study, by the American Association of University Women, a nonprofit membership group, and the market research firm Harris Interactive, asked a national sample of 2,064 boys and girls in the 8th

through 11th grades if they had ever experienced “unwanted and unwelcome sexual conduct,” either verbal or physical, from teachers or school employees. A previous study in 1993 included an identically worded question. The response was consistent in both surveys, with about 10 percent of both boys and girls saying they had. In New York State, the Department of Education receives hundreds of complaints a year that challenge a teacher’s or administrator’s moral character, but only a fraction are passed on to a professional standards and practices board. In the 2000-1 school year, the department handled 36 such cases; in the 2005-6 school year, it considered 104. The board decides whether the moral character of the person is sound enough to retain a teacher or administrator certificate. The types of behavior that would call into question a teacher’s moral character are varied: arson, drug possession and test fraud, to name a few. But the state report analyzed the kinds of incidents and crimes

that led to the moral fitness cases over those six years. It found that among the teachers and administrators whose certificates were challenged, more than two-thirds of the cases involved sex-related issues, including possession of child pornography, lewdness, inappropriate relationships with students and sex crimes. Some law enforcement officials said that closer working relationships with schools in recent years had underscored the issue. In New Jersey, for instance, school officials sign an annual agreement pledging to report any “suspicions that a student is being assaulted by a teacher or other student,” said John L. Molinelli, the Bergen County prosecutor handling the case of Mr. Darden. Similarly, the New York State School Boards Association has held workshops on handling accusations of abuse. “We have recommended that school districts really go beyond the reporting responsibility and actively train personnel as to the signs that sexual abuse has occurred,” said David L. Ernst, an association spokesman.

Still, it is sometimes easier to recall missed signs than it is to spot them at the time. At the Kaplan School in New Windsor, for instance, where the teacher and teacher's aide were accused of having sexual relations with two students, some colleagues have second-guessed their own impressions of the relationships.

"In hindsight, other employees of the school have said there was too much closeness between the two," said Judy Williams, a spokeswoman for McQuade Children's Services, a nonprofit organization that runs the private school. She was referring specifically to the relationship between the student and the teacher, Rebecca Becker, who was charged with third-degree rape, third-degree criminal sexual act and endangering the welfare of a child. The teacher's aide, Maria Zurita, was charged with third-degree rape and endangering the welfare of a child in a case involving the other student.

But, Ms. Williams added, in a therapeutic setting such as the one at the Kaplan School,

which serves about 85 students, "role modeling and relationship building is one of the most important things we do with students, so that's a difficult line to draw."

The police chief in New Windsor, Michael C. Biasotti, said one of the students was supposed to go home for the Memorial Day weekend, but he never showed up there. Fearing something had happened to him, school officials searched his dorm room and found 31 love letters from Ms. Becker.

The police say that instead of getting on the train, the student met Ms. Becker, and together they went to the home of Ms. Zurita, who was already with the second student. Both teachers, whose backgrounds had been checked in the state's child abuse data base before they were hired, have been fired. In Teaneck, the arrest of Mr. Darden was especially bitter for the community, not only because of his stature but also because it followed a disturbing case involving the former principal at the high school. Last June, Joseph White, then the

principal of Teaneck High School, was charged with endangering the welfare of a child after what prosecutors said was a sexually explicit conversation with a student in his office. That charge came three years after Mr. White was acquitted of molesting a teenage boy in his home. Mr. White was suspended from his job but reinstated after the acquittal. He retired soon after the most recent charges were lodged against him; those charges are still pending. Mr. Darden's arrest has divided this community. "The tragedy is that teachers are accessible to be accused of a lot of things," said Henry J. Pruitt, the school board president. "Sometimes it's not true, but in the meantime your reputation gets ruined along with the reputation of the school district." The Bergen County prosecutor, Mr. Molinelli, said that after Mr. Darden's arrest on June 1, another former student came forward. "There was intimate kissing and touching and a request to have sex, and the victim refused," he said. Mr. Darden, who has a

number of supporters, is now in the Bergen County jail, struggling to come up with \$350,000 for his bail. According to his lawyer, Wanda M. Akin, a fellow teacher is

posting her home as collateral for his bail. Some former students were plainly shaken by the accusations. "I'm shocked," said Zachary Hidalgo, a high school

senior. "He always held me to high standards and pushed me to my limit. I didn't think he could do that."