

# Long before the Walker Middle School rape case, schools struggled with locker room supervision

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Bruce Gifford knew the drill when he landed the head football coaching job last year at Hillsborough County's Riverview High School.

"I moved my office in the locker room," he said. "I just thought I wanted to be in the locker room to watch what was going on with my players. If I'm in there, there won't be any horseplay."

Middle and high school coaches across the bay area say they've always known that their locker rooms are a supervision nightmare. At the end of any given practice, some players are still on the field. Others are straggling into the locker room or showering.

They knew it long before last month's arrest of four Walker Middle School students, charged with raping a 13-year-old classmate four times over two months at the school with a broom and a hockey stick.

"If that happened in my locker room, they wouldn't have to fire me," Gifford said. "I would resign. I would not be able to live with the guilt of something like that happening in my locker room."

Hillsborough officials are still trying to figure out exactly what happened at Walker. The four boys, charged as adults, have pleaded not guilty. Principals are due to be trained soon on a new anti-bullying policy. The district is investigating whether the school failed to provide proper supervision. "The football field at Walker is 200 yards away from the locker room," said Jim Shepherd, a 64-year-old history teacher at the school.

Most students walk to cars after practice to be picked up by parents, he said, and for a coach to supervise all these places is "very difficult."

But the district isn't convinced that the incident has revealed a broader weakness in its supervision policies, said Lewis Brinson, assistant superintendent for administration.

"If we really had a supervision issue in a district of this size, you'd have more than one case, and a lot of unhappy parents," he said.

Teachers and administrators in the 190,000-student district are using the Walker incident as a "teachable moment" and a reminder of the existing policy, Brinson added.

"Any time students are in our schools, whether it's the locker room or classroom, we expect them to be supervised," he said. "If you need to lock down the locker room because you don't have enough manpower, then you do that. If you can't supervise it, you don't open it."

Alex Liem, director of school operations in Pinellas County, said monitoring a sprawling campus is easier said than done. Even with everyone on the lookout, there are more kids and corners than teachers' eyes.

"The expectation is each school devises its own plan for supervision," he said. "You look for the holes."

But he said it's shortsighted to focus exclusively on supervision in an effort to eradicate bullying.

"I think the key to the whole thing is that kids are in a position where they also feel a relationship with adults and share information," Liem said. "You create the kind of atmosphere in which kids feel they are a part of creating that safe and secure environment."

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Neither Hillsborough's nor Pinellas' policies say anything about locker rooms. But Hernando County's policy does, spelling out coaches' duties in detail. Two adults are better than one, it says, and empty rooms must be locked.

Tom McHugh, football coach at Pasco High, says he does the same thing.

"When they come in, I stay in the locker room, clear them out and close the door so there's no ease of access from room to room," he said.

"The kids are good. Guys horse around. They're always testing each other, wanting to wrestle and that sort of thing. I haven't had any problems."

But problems happen.

More than a decade before the Walker incident, the Ohio community of Stow was reeling from a high school locker room scandal. Over a period of several months beginning in 1997, a 14-year-old boy was hazed and sexually assaulted with a broomstick by members of the wrestling team.

"It was not adequately supervised, particularly in light of the fact that what happened took a period of time to accomplish, and the young man was putting up a fight at different times," said Douglas Fierberg, an attorney with the firm of Bode & Grenier who represented the victim. "It caused quite a ruckus."

The Stow-Munroe Falls school district eventually settled out of court, paying a substantial settlement to the victim and changing its policies to prevent a recurrence. With public awareness of hazing on the rise, it became a national example, featured on ABC's 20/20.

Cyle Feldman, athletic director of Stow-Munroe Falls High, wasn't working at the school when the incident happened. But he said its impact is still being felt.

Upperclassmen don't force freshmen to sweep the gym floor anymore. Coaches are in the locker room all the time, Feldman said.

And when he sees bigger kids picking on smaller ones, he stops it cold.

"They say, 'We were just horsing around,' " Feldman said. "No, no, no."