

Lawmakers respond to concerns about student sex offenders

Their proposals would change who's notified and where some offenders could attend school.



By [Joshunda Sanders](#)
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF
Wednesday, January 03, 2007

An attempted sexual assault at Reagan High School in October has several lawmakers looking to change state laws to keep juvenile sex offenders out of regular classrooms and to more quickly inform teachers and others when sex offenders enroll in school.

In November, Rep. Mark Strama, D-Austin, filed House Bill 138, which would require schools to place registered juvenile sex offenders in disciplinary alternative education programs — "a setting that's secure for everybody," Strama said.

But Marc Levin of the Center for Effective Justice at the pro-limited government Texas Public Policy Foundation, said putting registered sex offenders in alternative classrooms might raise safety concerns for other students at alternative schools.

"Most of the kids in the disciplinary education programs have just been disruptive in class; a lot of them are special-education kids," Levin said. "Our concern is having those kids sitting next to potentially violent sex offenders."

Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, and Rep. Rob Eissler, R-The Woodlands, are working on a proposal for the upcoming legislative session, which begins Tuesday, that would specify when school districts must notify adults who come into contact with sex offenders.

State law requires school districts to "promptly" notify anyone who will be supervising sex offenders — a word teachers' advocates say is too vague. Jeri Stone, executive director of the Texas Classroom Teachers Association, said the current law puts both students and teachers at risk because "we don't know how the word 'promptly' is being construed" by schools.

The proposals are a response to an Oct. 24 incident at Reagan High. Police charged 18-year-old student Manuel Nathan Mendoza with attempted sexual assault after police said he threatened a teacher with a

pair of scissors and groped her. He fled after the teacher stood up to him and was later arrested in Dallas.

The incident highlighted confusion over who was supposed to notify schools when sex offenders enrolled. Before the incident, Austin police gave the school district monthly lists of juvenile sex offenders registered in Austin; afterward, police changed their policy to alert school officials about juvenile registered sex offenders immediately.

Eissler said the legislation he and Shapiro are drafting would close another gap in the information chain.

Currently, a judge can decide that some juvenile sex offenders are not a threat to the public and don't have to be included on public sex offender registries. In those cases, only police and colleges and universities are notified. The proposed legislation would add public school districts to the list.

"We hope the Mendoza incident is an isolated one," Eissler said, "which is why we came up with a bill that will address the weaknesses that allowed the incident to come up."

Austin Independent School District Police Chief Pat Fuller said the proposed changes might help principals improve safety for students and staff, but "our department has to look after everyone, whether they're in a regular classroom or an alternative classroom. From our standpoint, these bills wouldn't have much of an impact one way or the other."

joshundasanders@statesman.com; 445-3630

Find this article at:

<http://www.statesman.com/news/content/news/stories/local/01/03/3sexoffenders.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.