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When friendship trumps protecting kids.

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Journal News columnist

You've heard it before - "He's not that kind of man" - and when a Putnam Valley middle school teacher was accused of drugging and raping a 12-year-old student, that apparently was what his friends thought.

And because those friends were school officials, they tried to thwart an investigation into the charges, a state investigation concluded.

"They couldn't believe that something like this might happen," the interim superintendent at the time, Robert Pauline, told the state Commission of Investigation in a report released this week. "They couldn't believe that he was that kind of person, that might (be) involved with young girls in that way . . . and my sense was that, as I recall, that they were friends enough that they would, if they had the opportunity, stonewall."

Pauline overruled them. He called the Putnam Valley school district's lawyers, demanded an investigation, and discovered that two other girls had previously reported allegations against the same teacher.

"There was no question in my mind," Pauline said this week. "I didn't need advice as to what to do. I never even thought to ask anyone, 'Do you want me to do this?' "

The commission's report, however, faulted others - in the school district, in the Putnam County Sheriff's Office and the county District Attorney's Office - for significant failures. As a result, commission chairman Alfred D. Lerner said what happened in the classroom that day might never be known.

All of this occurred five years ago as the Catholic church was continuing to be battered by its sex-abuse scandal. If ever there was a time to know to listen to children, that was it. No one could have escaped the news that men who children had trusted had callously betrayed them. Six priests in the Archdiocese of New York had been removed from their churches, among them a pastor in Putnam Lake, and a commission headed by former Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating was scrutinizing the American bishops' response.

Shortly before Laura Bliss alleged she had been sexually assaulted, a diocese on Long Island had been sued for a total of nearly \$2 billion. The men who brought the lawsuits accused the Diocese of Rockville Centre of knowingly concealing information about sexual abuse by priests. If ever there was a time to know not to try to cover up accusations, that was it.

Laura Bliss and her father, Peter, reported her allegations to the Putnam County's Sheriff's Office in May 2003. She said that two years earlier her teacher, identified in court papers as Dennis Tave, had assaulted her when she stayed after school to study for a test she had missed. She drank some water he gave her, started feeling dizzy and fell to the floor when he hugged her and tripped her, according to her account. Before she blacked out, she said, she saw him unbuckle his belt and unzip his pants. When she regained consciousness, she said, she noticed that her pants and her underwear

were around her knees.

In the end, no charges were brought against Tave, and he retired from the school. The sheriff's investigation was closed. Tave's teacher license has been suspended by the state Education Department until he undergoes a psychological evaluation and completes any mental-health treatment that is recommended.

The girl's family still has a \$17 million federal lawsuit against him and the school district. Tave has said the charges are a fabrication.

Pauline was serving as the district's superintendent only for another month when he was told of the accusations against Tave. Edward Hallisey, Putnam Valley Middle School principal, and Gail Gutterman, the ex-president of the Putnam Valley Federation of Teachers, had already met with Tave.

"Clearly Mr. Hallisey and Ms. Gutterman demonstrated no desire to conduct a full and unbiased investigation, and no concern for (Laura Bliss) or for other students similarly situated," the report said.

Further, according to the report, Hallisey told his teaching staff: "to exonerate (the teacher), we have to trash (the student); to exonerate (the student), (the teacher) gets trashed."

Hallisey has said he was just telling his staff not to talk to the press. The commission was not persuaded.

"His choice of words reflected his loyalty to the teacher and his lack of concern for the student," the report concluded.

Pauline said that he was surprised Tave was allowed to retire in return for no charges from the school district.

What did he think had occurred in Putnam Valley?

"If you work together for 10 or 15 years, lines of authority get blurred, and I think that's what happened. Everybody had been there working together for a long, long time and were friends. And it was friendship before protecting kids," Pauline said.
