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COMMUNITY

# American School for the Deaf's director reassures community, state child advocate blasts 'concerningly brief' abuse report



By **EMILY BRINDLEY**

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West Hartford, Ct. - 02/25/2020 - A statue in front of the American School for the Deaf memorializes the schools founder Joseph Gallaudet. Last week an ASD report was released identifying 75 credible allegations of abuse of young students by faculty, staff and a former director. Photograph by Mark Mirko | mmirko@courant.com (Mark Mirko / Hartford Courant)

Following the release of a report outlining dozens of abuse allegations at the American School for the Deaf, the school's executive director is reassuring the community that in the decades since the alleged abuse the school has become a safe, nurturing space for its students.

The state Department of Children and Families praised ASD for reporting and investigating the abuse allegations. But the state child advocate lambasted the school for its "concerningly brief" report and for its failure to respond to the report with tangible improvements to student safety.

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ASD, which has its main campus in West Hartford, was the first permanent school for the deaf in North America. It currently has approximately 150 students and 200 staff members, and serves people ranging in ages 3 to 21.

[An investigation reveals allegations that deaf children were sexually and physically abused for decades at the American School for the Deaf »](#)

On Feb. 21, ASD released [\*\*a findings report\*\*](#) that outlined 75 credible allegations of sexual and physical abuse at the school's West Hartford campus and its Camp Isola Bella in Salisbury. The report reaches far into the past — it encompasses alleged abuse from the late 1950s through the 1980s and includes accusations against nine

former faculty and staff, including a longtime director of the school. Many of those accused have since died.



Communicating with American Sign Language, Jeffrey Bravin, executive director at the American School for the Deaf and who is himself deaf, comments from his office on a recent ASD report identifying 75 credible allegations of abuse of young students by faculty, staff and a former director. (Mark Mirko / Hartford Courant)

Days after the school released the report, ASD Executive Director Jeffrey Bravin sat down with the Courant in his office on the school's campus. Through an ASL interpreter, Bravin talked about the investigative process and the school's reaction to the allegations of widespread sexual abuse and corporal punishment.

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Child Advocate Sarah Eagan, who runs the state's watchdog for child safety and well-being, said ASD's response to these allegations is particularly important because the school serves [a vulnerable population](#).

[State lawmakers question timing, hope for change after the American School for the Deaf's report on abuse allegations »](#)

“It is essential that programs that serve highly vulnerable people are adequately monitored,” Eagan said. “Unfortunately, the information provided by ASD is altogether too brief and doesn’t answer any of these questions.”

Meanwhile, Bravin pointed to the school’s improved security measures since the time of the abuse and continuously updated policies as evidence that ASD is now a safer place for children.

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He also said he doesn’t believe his students are any different — or more vulnerable — than other students.

“As a Deaf individual, I have to be honest, we are no different than any other hearing individual in the public school systems,” Bravin said.



American School for the Deaf faculty, staff, and alumni will trek over a 200-mile course around Connecticut, to honor the school's bicentennial. The riders will take off from the campus June 18, riding 50 miles around the Greater Hartford area, including a stop at Gallaudet's grave in the state's capital. The route makes stops at memorials and landmarks important to the deaf community. (Dennis Hohenberger / Special to Courant Community)

## **'Extremely disturbing'**

It started with a Facebook post.

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In early February 2019, an ASD staff member found out about a Facebook post written by an ASD alumnus, Bravin said. In the post, the alumnus described their experience at the school in the 1960s and 1970s, including their mistreatment at the hands of staff.

“I found it extremely disturbing,” Bravin said of the post. “As a Deaf leader, I do not want to see any Deaf child hurt in any shape or form.”

Bravin said the school immediately reached out to the alumnus for more information, notified the president of the school’s Board of Directors and contacted the school attorney.

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As the school decided to launch a formal investigation, Bravin said, administrators also notified DCF, the state Department of Education, the governor’s office and the West Hartford Police Department. Administrators also made a wider call, to those who may have been directly affected.

Through video logs, hard copy letters and emails, the school notified alumni, staff, past students and current parents about the budding investigation. Bravin said he also spoke with current students.

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“I’ve always believed in transparency,” Bravin said. “It was a very open and transparent process from Day One.”

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The school also quickly decided it couldn't use its in-house counsel to investigate, and instead hired Edward Heath, an attorney at Hartford-based firm Robinson + Cole.

Over the course of a year — from February 2019 to February 2020 — Heath conducted a comprehensive investigation. He interviewed 81 people, according to ASD's findings report, and turned up dozens of allegations. The findings report classified many of those allegations as "direct" and "credible."



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The most recent allegations cited in the findings report took place in the 1980s, but both Bravin and Heath said the school did not set a time limit on the investigation.

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Heath said in an email that the school had charged him with investigating “all allegations of abuse of a student by a school employee or volunteer, occurring at any point in time” that were brought forward as a result of the community notification in early 2019.

“Reports we received of pervasive physical abuse started in the 1950s and stopped in the 1980s,” Heath said in an email.

Heath said there was at least one additional allegation of sexual abuse after that time frame, which did not meet the investigation’s standards for naming the alleged perpetrator in the report. The findings report issued by the school nods to the existence of additional allegations, but does not provide any specifics.

## **Lingering questions**

Although the school received a copy of Heath’s full investigation report, ASD has not publicly released that version of the report.

The publicly available report, the one posted on the school’s website, is a slimmed-down version. Bravin said the school has no intention of publicly releasing the full version, or a redacted full version, and cited concerns about the safety and well-being of the abuse survivors who spoke with Heath.

Eagan, the child advocate, takes issue with the brevity of the public-facing report.





Child Advocate Sarah Eagan offers testimony at a December 2017 hearing. (Patrick Raycraft / Hartford Courant)

“The summary of findings put out by ASD is concerningly brief and leaves outstanding ... questions about the scope of the problem,” Eagan said. It also leaves questions about “the adequacy of steps being taken to prevent child abuse and neglect generally.”

The public-facing report does outline some steps ASD has taken, including background checks for potential employees, mandated reporter training for staff members and cooperation with law enforcement and state agencies. Eagan noted all of these measures are required by state law.

Bravin said the school has also installed more than 200 cameras around campus since the summer, and just last week launched an app for students to anonymously report abuse and bullying. Bravin said the school uses the cameras to go back and evaluate situations after the fact — which Eagan noted is a reactive measure, not a preventive one.

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While Eagan said her office sees abuse and neglect of children in all types of settings, from churches and day cares to camps and schools, she also said children with disabilities are at a higher risk for mistreatment.

A [study from the Rochester Institute of Technology](#) found that deaf and hard-of-hearing children are 25 percent more likely to experience mistreatment — including neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse — when compared with hearing children.

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And although students come to ASD because they are deaf or hard of hearing, Bravin said about 70 percent of his students have additional, co-occurring disabilities.

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This could increase their risk for mistreatment — Eagan said that people with intellectual disabilities, for instance, are seven times more likely to be sexually abused.

“Children with disabilities are at a heightened risk, statistically,” Eagan said. “We would be hopeful that leadership of this storied and historic program would take additional steps to be transparent about these urgent matters.”

Bravin said he doesn't believe ASD needs policies that are more stringent than state law requires, both because he believes his students are not more vulnerable than other children and because of the support his students receive at the school.

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“We have the policies and procedures in place that protect our students and staff, like any other school should have,” Bravin said. “So I'm not sure why we should be different than any other school.”

## **‘Let's talk about these issues’**

Eagan's Office of the Child Advocate often launches investigations into cases of rampant abuse, including at schools. But Eagan said the limited resources in her six-person office will likely prevent her from opening a formal investigation into ASD.

But there's potential for scrutiny from other groups.

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The executive director of another watchdog group, Gretchen Knauff of [Disability Rights Connecticut](#), previously told the Courant that the organization is reviewing ASD's report and considering potential next steps. Knauff said Wednesday she's not yet prepared to further discuss the organization's response.

The West Hartford Police Department also opened an investigation into the ASD allegations. Department spokesperson Capt. Michael Perruccio said Thursday that the investigation is still ongoing and declined to comment further.

Two state agencies offered more detail on their responses.

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The state Department of Education's spokesperson, Peter Yazbak, said the department is currently exploring whether any of the alleged abusers have active education certifications.

Yazbak said ASD also submits yearly paperwork showing its compliance with state regulations surrounding student safety. That process will continue.

"Fortunately, many of the checks and balances intended to prevent this type of abuse ... have advanced tremendously since the period of time during which the abuse occurred," Yazbak said.

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DCF also is investigating the allegations made in ASD's report, according to Bureau Chief of External Affairs Ken Mysogland and Deputy Commissioner Michael Williams.

Mysogland and Williams said that, as a first step, DCF has already determined there are no children at risk in the specific situations described in ASD's report — namely because all of those children are now adults.

The immediate concerns eased, they said DCF is now investigating whether any of the people accused in the reports still have access to children through their professional work. Because many of the accused people have already died, DCF may be able to wrap up that process fairly quickly.

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may be able to do the exact same things," Williams said.

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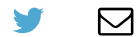
And while her office isn't planning its own investigation, Eagan said she hopes ASD will be able to learn from her ongoing [investigations into the New London](#) and Stonington school districts. She would also like to see the state government take note of systemic child abuse, and suggested a public hearing at the end of the current legislative session.

"There's an opportunity for some public discussion," Eagan said. "Let's talk about these issues and what's really required by child-serving organizations to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect."

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