



Tampa Bay Times

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MONSTER TORNADO RAVAGES KENTUCKY

Governor fears more than 70 fatalities in "most devastating tornado" ever in state.

BY BRUCE SCHREINER AND JIM SALTER
Associated Press

MAYFIELD, Ky. — Kentucky's governor said Saturday that a monstrous tornado likely killed dozens of people in the state and the toll was climbing after severe weather ripped through at least five states, leaving widespread devastation.

Gov. Andy Beshear said upwards of 70 may have died when a twister touched down for more than 200 miles in his state but the number of deaths could exceed 100 across 10 or more counties.

"This has been the most devastating tornado event in our state's history," Beshear said at a news conference.

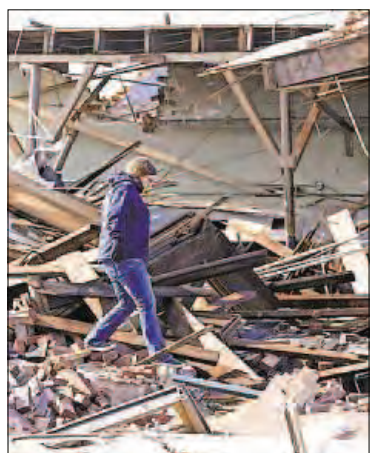
The storms hit a candle factory in Kentucky, an Amazon facility in Illinois and a nursing home in Arkansas. Officials had confirmed 18 deaths, including 10 in Kentucky's Muhlenberg County and an undetermined number in an around the city of Bowling Green. Beshear said about 110 people were in the Mayfield factory when the tornado roared through.

Debris from destroyed buildings and shredded trees covered the ground in Mayfield, a city of about 10,000 in western Kentucky. Twisted metal sheeting, downed power lines and wrecked vehicles lined the streets of what was barely recognizable as a town.

The missing at the candle factory included Denise Johnson Williams, a 50-year-old mother of four whose family members kept vigil at the site Saturday.

"It's Christmastime and she works at a place that's making candles for gifts," her brother, Darryl Williams, said. "To give up the gift of life to make a gift. We haven't heard anything, and I'm not presuming anything. But I'm expecting for the worst."

He said Johnson Williams called her husband overnight to report the weather was getting bad, the last time anyone heard
See STORMS, 3A



MARK HUMPHREY | Associated Press
People survey extensive damage from the tornado in Mayfield, Ky., on Saturday.



"STUDENTS SHOULDN'T BE SCARED"

Rufus del Valle reported sexual harassment at his school to high-level officials.

Photo by ARIELLE BADER
Illustration by SEAN KRISTOFF-JONES | Times

A TIMES INVESTIGATION

Tampa teens wanted their school to protect them. Instead, they say, it got worse.

BY BETHANY BARNES | *Times Staff Writer*

For Rufus del Valle, high school had been a scary place, where he felt powerless. All four years had been marred by seemingly unchecked sexually inappropriate behavior from both students and teachers.

Back then, he hadn't spoken up, afraid of retaliation. But during his first semester of college, he had become increasingly certain that what he experienced at Blake High School in Tampa shouldn't be normal. What if he could get someone in charge to listen now?

So in 2019, he wrote to several high-level district officials. Responses started coming back in a few hours.

Most of what he detailed was about seeing friends suffer from what he understood to be sexual abuse. His happiest high school memory wasn't being runner-up for homecoming king or playing his guitar during the winter concert — it was the day a fellow student was arrested. Del Valle knew of several girls who'd accused this boy of abusive behavior; he'd walked one friend in tears to the office to report him. Yet he heard again and

again the issues weren't being taken seriously enough. So the relief at the arrest — and the hope of broader accountability — had been overwhelming. What was painful wasn't just what happened to the students, but what those in charge said about it.

"During my senior year, the administration held a meeting for all the senior boys. We were told not to engage in PDA in the hallways because, when relationships go south, that's when girls will lie and say it was abuse," he wrote in his message to district officials. "How is any student supposed to feel comfortable reporting abuse when the administration says stuff like that?"

One official jumped on the phone with him, but that ultimately didn't seem to go anywhere. The secretary of the School Board forwarded del Valle's message to Harrison Peters, then the chief of schools.

At first, it went well. Peters thanked him for his courage and said he'd love to chat. He asked for names so he could start an investigation. Del Valle asked if
See BLAKE, 6A

Read Part 1: Upended

Hillsborough schools have a troubled history when it comes to protecting students from sexual misconduct.

Note to readers

The Perspective section includes an editorial that, among other things, calls on regulators to perform random testing of lead levels in the air around Gopher Resource's smelter in Tampa. The section was printed before news broke Friday that regulators were doubling the number of air samples and testing on a new randomized schedule.

TAMPA BAY INFLATION LEADS THE NATION

With an 8 percent rise in the cost of living, the Tampa Bay region leads 12 other major metropolitan areas in the country in a year-over-year comparison. New York was lowest at 5 percent. **Local & State, 1B**

AREA DRAWS NEW TYPE OF NEWCOMER

It's not just Northerners moving to Tampa Bay to escape the cold. Residents from South Florida are flocking north for more affordable housing and a less stressful lifestyle. **Business, 1D**

Cloudy, a shower

8 a.m. Noon 4 p.m. 8 p.m.
71° 79° 80° 74°

80% chance of rain
More, Page 8C

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INSIDE SUNDAY

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BLAKE continued from 1A

Peters could guarantee that neither Blake High nor the district would retaliate against named victims.

Later that day, after checking with some of the students involved, del Valle wrote out everything he knew. He named people who'd given him permission.

"If you do your investigation and find there was nothing wrong, and everything was handled to the letter, then there's still a problem," del Valle typed. "I shouldn't have to wait four years, from 14 to 18, to feel safe to report this to my district. Students shouldn't be scared to talk to adults that are there to help them." He attached the document to an email and hit send.

The response he would receive was part of a larger pattern, the *Tampa Bay Times* has found.

In the past five years at this one high school, a boy was expelled after he tried to warn classmates that a student had sexually harassed others.

Students reported a teacher for inappropriate comments, but the school failed to document their concerns.

And administrators suspended two girls who told police they'd been raped on campus.

Twenty-two current and former Blake students described to the *Times* a feeling that no one would protect them at school.

The *Times* investigation is also based on police reports, student disciplinary files, federal and court records, emails and text messages.

This investigation comes after the *Times* published a story in June about what happened when teens at Blake High reported a biology teacher for inappropriate sexual comments. District and police investigations bore out their concerns, and the teacher resigned, but the students felt confused and dejected by the process.

The *Times* interviewed three experts on Title IX, the federal law that requires schools to keep students safe from sexual harassment. All three said the problems the *Times* uncovered at Blake raise concerns about the district's system for keeping children safe.

"These are issues that we've seen in cases that we've litigated," said Shiwali Patel, senior counsel for the National Women's Law Center.

All of these incidents happened under the watch of the federal government.

The Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights says it's kept an active eye on Hillsborough County Public Schools for 10 years — ever since the agency found the district retaliated against a student who reported sexual abuse. The 2011 investigation concluded Hillsborough didn't have enough protections in place to keep students safe under Title IX. The government made a deal with Hillsborough that if the district implemented changes, it could avoid enforcement, and monitoring would end. The district said it has done everything the agency asked for and hasn't heard feedback in years. But the district remains, if only technically, under federal scrutiny.

Colleges have had major public reckonings on sexual harassment in recent years, with sprawling debates about how to handle hearings and process. But much less attention has been paid to K-12, where those at risk are children who depend on the adults in charge to protect them in a manner that is both just and sensitive.

It's because of the immense toll sexual harassment can have on a student's education that schools are required to investigate and offer support. The task can be challenging. School officials might have conflicting accounts and little evidence, which can be compounded if the accused is a student, and the two children must be kept apart while making sure both get an education. If students feel the adults aren't solving a problem, they may try to fix it themselves in ways administrators don't like, or they may simply stop telling authorities about issues entirely.

Patel said it isn't uncommon for school districts to struggle to follow Title IX and even retaliate against students trying to get help. What's rare, she said, is that the public hears about it.

Tanya Arja, the district's chief of communications, said the district cannot speak about specific incidents because of student privacy laws, but emphasized students mentioned by the *Times* were offered support. She called the *Times* investigation irresponsible and asserted that district records



ARIELLE BADER | Special to the Times

Twenty-two current and former Blake High School students report feeling like no one there would protect them.

On Fri, Sep 20, 2019, 1:04 PM Harrison Peters <harrison.peters@sdhc.k12.fl.us> wrote:
Hi Rufus,
I am in receipt of your message regarding Blake. Thank you for having the courage to share. I'm wondering if you could share names as I cannot determine who to begin with. It is difficult to investigate this matter with the level of anonymity in the letter. I'd love to chat with you.

HP
Harrison Peters
Chief of Schools
Hillsborough County Public Schools

Mr. Peters,

I am putting together a list of stories and names, its taking a lot longer than expected because of the volume of people who have similar experiences at Blake.

A lot of the victims are scared to put there names down because they fear retaliation from the school, hence my anonymity in the first message. Is there any guarantee you could give that and victims who are named wont face retaliation from Blake High or the School Board

Sincerly
Rufus del Valle

On Fri, Sep 27, 2019, 1:39 PM Harrison Peters <harrison.peters@sdhc.k12.fl.us> wrote:
Rufus thanks so much for sharing your thoughts and I appreciate your perspective. I would agree with you that we have the responsibility to address these allegations. However, since you have not shared names then I can be very little help. If you are truly a friend to these young people and truly want to see justice and you do not report these atrocities then I worry about justice occurring. We ca go back and forth all day but i cannot help if I don't know the victims. We all have responsibilities to be great humans and citizens to our fellow man. Do not hide behind the badge of friendship and blame others when you can help and refuse to help. Again, you have provided me with no names.

Be well,
HP

Emails courtesy of Rufus del Valle

An email exchange between former Blake High School student Rufus de Valle and Harrison Peters, who was then Hillsborough County's chief of schools.

contradict the reporting.

"Hillsborough County Public Schools works diligently to ensure each of our students knows how to report any situation that makes them feel uncomfortable on school grounds or school sponsored events," Arja said. "We have staff on every campus including counselors, social workers, school psychologists, mental health clinicians, teachers, and administrators who advocate for students and provide a safe, nurturing learning environment."

In an interview with the *Times*, Monica Verra-Tirado, who joined the district in 2020 as the chief of equity, diversity and inclusion, emphasized a commitment to making sure students are safe from sexual harassment and that their rights are protected.

"Everything is taken seriously," she said.

When del Valle got Peters' reply, it didn't address concerns about



Bostonglobe.com

retaliation. Peters wanted to know why del Valle hadn't gone to the police, as what he described seemed to be crimes.

Del Valle wrote back that he didn't feel it was his place to report to the police on behalf of the victims. He said that was the job of the school district.

Peters responded that he was legally bound to report to the police. But he also said del Valle should notify the police, too. "If

not then it sends the message that you are not serious and really don't want justice."

Del Valle was taken aback.

"I understand you have to report to the police. That's the whole reason I contacted you," del Valle replied. "I didn't expect you would try to give your job to a 18-year-old instead."

Peters agreed that the district had a duty to address the allegations, but he said that he could be

of little help without names.

"We all have responsibilities to be great humans and citizens to our fellow man," Peters wrote. "Do not hide behind the badge of friendship and blame others when you can help and refuse to help."

Del Valle replied that his attachment had included names.

Peters wrote back an apology, saying the system had filtered out the attachment and thanking him again for his courage. Del Valle was furious over the way Peters had treated him. He waited for an investigation, but all he learned in the coming months was that Peters was a strong candidate for superintendent. He was awash in relief when he didn't get the job.

"Nobody who has the power to affect change cares," del Valle said. "That's the biggest takeaway."

Peters, who could not be reached for comment, left Hillsborough in 2020 to become a superintendent in Providence, R.I. He was forced out in May after that district discovered he hired a colleague from Florida who had been accused by multiple boys of inappropriate touching.



The fear of retaliation wasn't hypothetical, del Valle said. He'd seen what happened to a boy who'd tried to warn others about issues of sexual harassment. The *Times* is only naming students who were comfortable sharing their names.

In 2019, a Blake student heard that another student had inappropriately touched his friend. That student told the *Times* he went to the office to make a report, but later that day, he got impatient and doubted the administration would handle the matter. So he made an anonymous Instagram account and posted the student's name, picture and wrote that he'd been sexually inappropriate.

Student Alexandra Reyes saw the post and felt ill, she told the *Times*. She thought it was about what had happened to her. She sent the account a message asking that it be taken down.

"I can't do that," the student wrote back. "I can't let him walk away."

After exchanging more messages, Reyes realized the post was about someone else.

Others also messaged the student, worried the post was about their own experiences. With their permission, he put the four girls into a group chat, which the *Times* reviewed.

In the chat, he encouraged the students to speak out and report. But soon, he had an update that disturbed them all.

"I got suspended for 2 days for cyberbullying," he wrote to the girls. When he was in the office getting punished, he told a deputy and guidance counselor four separate girls had told him they'd been harassed by this same student.

"He said they could be lying," he wrote. "The deputy said that."

The student anguished over whether he had made the situation worse. But if he hadn't posted something, how would the students have learned they weren't alone?

See BLAKE, 7A

The subject and female received five days of suspension from school. I informed Cpl. [REDACTED] Sgt. [REDACTED] and Sgt. [REDACTED] Fine of Sex Crimes of this incident. Arrangements were made with the Nurse Examiners office, and the parents transported the female to that location. Det. [REDACTED] was advised of the details of this offense.

Tampa Police Department

A girl was suspended for five days after she accused a boy of rape during school hours at Blake.

BLAKE
continued from 6A

He saw no evidence that the boy he'd reported had faced even a question from the school.

"I literally sat around and waited for something to happen to this guy," he told the *Times*. "Nothing ever changed."

So the next school year, still mad, he pulled out his phone and used Apple's airdrop feature to warn everyone in the area with an iPhone about this student. It was like pulling a digital fire alarm.

Administrators sprung into action — and expelled him. The district sent him to an alternative school. He struggled with depression and thoughts of suicide. In college, he finds himself irritable and anxious when something doesn't go as planned. He reminds himself he might feel that way because of his experience at Blake. He doesn't think he handled the situation well, he said, but he had been trying to do something good.

Charol Shakeshaft, an expert on Title IX who has been studying equity for more than 30 years, said the teen's mass message indicates how desperate he'd become.

The district disciplined him for bullying, records show, not for making the complaint. Still, the two are related, said Shakeshaft, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. If administrators didn't communicate with him about his complaint and then punished him for taking another step on his own, the punishment could be considered retribution and violate Title IX, she said.

She said it's rare for students to come forward, and school officials must take every report seriously. If they don't, she said, it doesn't take much for students to give up.

Reyes said that what students took away from the school's response to the airdrop was that inappropriate sexual behavior wouldn't be punished, but reporting it would. As a result, Reyes said, she didn't report her own experience to school officials.

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For some students, the pain of high school lingers.

One young woman, reached by the *Times*, struggled to talk about what happened at Blake High School, even five years later.

She apologized for not being more articulate. That had been the problem, as she understood it. She thought she'd sounded too stupid to be believed when she accused another student of rape in 2016. Her school decided she'd had sex on campus willingly and suspended her.

"Guilty until proven innocent, I guess," she said.

She cried as she explained to a *Times* reporter what happened and then apologized for crying.

"She beats herself up," her mother said. "This happened all these years ago, and it still just tears her up."

It had been her junior year at Blake, a school she'd worked hard to get into because she was an artist and the magnet program provided a chance to do what she loved. It had happened on a Thursday, and she'd spent the weekend trying to figure out if it had been rape. She hadn't said no, but she had told him — and would tell the police — that she was afraid and in pain. She told her mother, and they went to report it that Monday. The school immediately notified police.

A resource officer wrote in a report that the initial investigation couldn't substantiate the girl's allegations, and the case was referred to the sex crimes division. The boy also was suspended.

The girl told police she had been sitting in a hallway working on an art project when a boy she hardly knew approached her. According to the report, he told her he was "horny" and asked if she could help. She didn't respond initially, the report says, but he "continued to push the topic." Then he began to undo her pants and put his tongue in her mouth, which she told police was shocking.

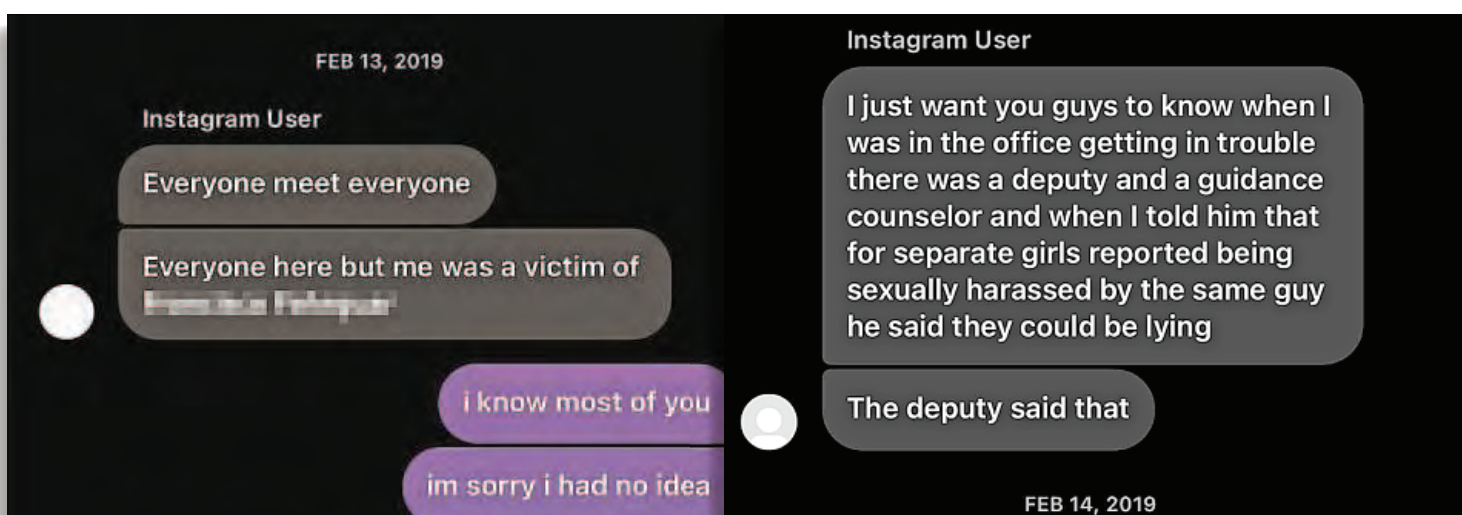
She went on to tell them she'd said, "Oh no, this is scary, this is scary, this is scary," the report says. And that when she yelled, as they were having sex, he shushed her. At one point, he'd grown frustrated with her and told her she was doing it wrong, she said, so she obeyed him and switched positions. He suddenly stopped and told her she was bleeding. She reported that she had bruises all over her knees, and she bled all day, assertions backed up by the nurse's sexual battery examination.

After she finished with the nurse, she talked to officers, who by then knew the boy had told a different version of the encoun-



ARIELLE BADER | Special to the Times

Del Valle says he regrets not speaking up about Tiffany Johnson, a teacher who resigned amid accusations of inappropriate behavior.



FEB 14, 2019

Instagram messages courtesy of Alexandra Reyes

The boy who made this group chat was expelled from Blake.

for help and it still wasn't good enough. The girl felt he was popping up everywhere, staring at her. So, her senior year, the family attempted to get a restraining order but was unsuccessful.

Then, two years after the incident, an officer came to their house. The officer wanted to pursue the case — there were new accusations against the boy.

The girl burst into tears as the officer tried to ask questions.

"That was like the best opportunity that I ever had, regardless of how stupid I sounded, to advocate for myself," the girl recalled to the *Times*. "I just couldn't do it."

The girl said she can't even stand to think about talking to anyone from high school, though other students had been comforting at the time.

"That's not how I wanted to be remembered," she said. "What little I was."

In the new case, a student had reported to the school that a friend had gone to her upset and explained she had tried to buy weed from the boy, but he'd wanted sexual favors for it, and they'd had sex. The girl told the friend she wanted to kill him, a police report says. This girl was 14, and the boy was then 18.

According to the report, the girl had Asperger's and struggled with social situations.

"It made her uncomfortable, and she did not say anything because she couldn't process what was going on," the report says.

The boy told police they'd had consensual sex, and he'd been accused of rape at school before, with a girl whose name he couldn't remember.

Prosecutors charged him under Florida's statutory rape law. He accepted a deal, pleading to felony battery with a 5-year probation plan that included sex offender treatment. This was the arrest del Valle described as the happiest day of high school.

Again, the school suspended the girl, who declined to comment when reached by the *Times*. The girl's dad told officers his daugh-

ter left the district because of what happened and that he felt the school failed to protect her.

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In June, del Valle read a story in the *Times* that stirred up all the feelings from high school. The story was about his biology teacher, Tiffany Johnson.

Student complaints had forced investigations into inappropriate behavior, and she had resigned.

Del Valle felt shame for not including her in his message to district officials two years ago. He kept thinking of prom photos he'd taken with Johnson that made him feel uneasy. In a photo booth together, she's pictured kissing him on the cheek and draping herself over him, poses you would do with a prom date, not a teacher.

The *Times* story detailed that it took 19 days for the school to call the police and put the teacher on leave after complaints. The girl who made the initial complaint came under unusual scrutiny and was kicked out of school for vaping on campus. The girl's parents, one of her teachers and others who filed complaints all believed that to be retaliation.

Parent Roberta Shelor said she'd heard several stories regarding Johnson and, while she'd encouraged her daughter to report them, she hadn't pressed since she didn't have her as a teacher. Reading the story, she felt anguish and guilt that she hadn't pushed her daughter to speak up.

She said she was appalled at what happened to Madisyn Slater, the student who first wrote the superintendent about the teacher. Slater didn't have Johnson as a teacher, but she sounded the alarm and encouraged others with direct experiences to speak up.

"I just think she is extraordinary," Shelor said.

The silence from the board and district officials sends a message of indifference, she said.

"What else are you going to infer?"

After the story ran, all seven elected School Board members declined to comment, referring the *Times* to a spokeswoman.

Board member Jessica Vaughn did say publicly she had heard from community members about the story, and she planned to meet with the superintendent, as well as make remarks at the following board meeting.

Some teens quoted in the story, including Rebeca Braukman, waited to hear what would be said about their experiences, but in the end, Vaughn didn't address it at the meeting.

"I just know they don't care. They won't care. They never will care," Braukman said. "That's how See BLAKE, 9A

ter. He said he'd gone up to a girl, whose name he didn't know, told her he was horny, asked what she could do about that, and she'd given him oral sex. Later that day, he told them, the girl had asked to finish what they'd started, and they'd gone to the boy's bathroom and had sex. It had been entirely consensual, he told officers.

The officers asked her to explain why the boy didn't realize she hadn't wanted to have sex. She said she thought he would know because she had been yelling in pain and said it hurt. They asked her what should happen to someone who did what he did.

Jail, she told them.

Several days later, the girl went with her parents to police headquarters, where an officer asked to interview her alone. The officer wanted to know why she hadn't mentioned going into the boy's bathroom, which was caught on surveillance video. She told the officer because nothing sexual had happened there. She'd gotten the impression they could talk about what happened, but instead, he'd wanted sex again, which she said didn't happen, according to the police report.

She said again that she'd repeatedly told the boy she was

scares and in pain.

After the interview, the officer showed her parents the video and advised them it didn't bode well for her case, according to the report. Still, the family insisted they wanted to press charges. The officer told them they'd have to wait for DNA results. A year went by without any word.

As her mother understood it, the video had been considered "damning."

"They didn't understand why she would do that," her mother recalled.

"I wasn't looking at him as an evil person at the time," the girl told the *Times*.

She said she suspects she's on the autism spectrum and tries to have empathy for others who are misunderstood, awkward or don't fit in.

"I didn't want to be mean," she said with a sigh, thinking back on her interaction with the boy.

"The whole thing was horrific," her mother said. "We felt they weren't listening, we felt they were blaming, we felt they were trying to just cover it up."

The school devised a plan to keep the students apart and offered the girl counseling, but her mother said she had to push

On 3/17/16 I met with [redacted] and her parents in the lobby of Police Headquarters. I escorted them to Sex Crimes/Family Violence waiting area and asked to speak to [redacted] alone. Her parents agreed and I brought [redacted] into my office. I informed her that I had interviewed [redacted] and that I knew she was interviewed again by School Staff due to video surveillance that showed both going into the boys bathroom after school on the day she alleged to be raped.

I attempted to call the victim and the number was disconnected. On 6/22/18, I went to the victim's address and she immediately began crying when I went to ask her questions about the incident and see if she wanted to proceed with the case. I advised her to take some time to think about it and call me next week. Her mother was also at the residence and advised that she was very fragile. The victim advised she was [redacted] in this incident happened and [redacted]

Tampa Police Department

The boy accused of rape in this report was charged with the crime years later in another case.

BLAKE
continued from 7A

it's always been."

"At least say something," she said. "Like, 'We're sorry.'"

Worse, she felt gaslit. She'd told the *Times* she didn't believe the school would take the complaints seriously because she and others had previously reported a male teacher. Nothing came of that, as far as they knew. Then, in the story, a district spokesperson said there had been no complaints.

Why didn't her school district believe her, Braukman wondered, especially when another student and parent had said the same thing to the *Times*?

That other student, after the story ran, shared with the *Times* the complaint she'd emailed in 2019 to the principal and an assistant principal. And del Valle, in his 2019 complaint, had named that male teacher, too.

Asked again about this and provided documentation, the district acknowledged there had been complaints. Arja, the district's spokesperson, said the teacher was counseled regarding inappropriate comments and noted it was unfortunate there was no copy of "a letter of direction."

The teacher moved to another school and, eventually, to another district.

"The record-keeping is just really frustrating," said Patel, of the National Women's Law Center. "The data they have, it doesn't truly reflect what actually is happening."

When an email like that comes in, said Shakeshaft, the district is supposed to open a Title IX investigation, make a decision on what occurred and document not just what the district did but how it is checking up on it and making sure it doesn't happen again. Also, students who complained should be aware of the process, not left to wonder, she said. Hillsborough's own policies state when someone makes a formal complaint, they "should keep the complainant informed of the status of the investigation and the decision-making process."

Braukman, who complained twice about teachers, said that didn't happen. And she's still there, finishing out her senior year.

In the *Times* story, del Valle had read that, a decade earlier, the district had gotten in trouble with the



ARIELLE BADER | Special to the Times

Rebeca Braukman, now a senior at Blake High School, has complained twice about teachers who made her uncomfortable, only to feel unheard.

the district uses, reports results based on positivity. Meaning the district is given the percentage of students who responded "favorably" to a question.

For example, one question is "I would report sexually inappropriate behavior if it happened to me," and the report says that 74 percent of those who took the survey responded favorably. Sixty-two percent responded favorably to the question "Reports of sexually inappropriate behavior are taken seriously at this school." The district can open a dashboard provided by Panorama if it wants to see details about negative responses.

The district said it thinks the results are a sign that students know how to report and would if they needed to.

Former Blake student Ethan Guear was one of the students who let del Valle name him in his account of problems at the school. He told the *Times* he'd been afraid to go to school his freshman year because of sexual harassment. Guear said he was repeatedly groped and kissed by a student without consent. He reported it but said he couldn't get anyone to investigate.

He was also at the boys' assembly meeting del Valle had recalled, and remembers it as a moment of horrible clarity. No wonder he couldn't get help, if this is what the people in charge assumed — that victims lied.

He wants a rigorous investigation into Hillsborough County Public Schools.

As far as he can tell, what the federal government has done for the past 10 years is nothing.

"The federal government should at least apologize for not monitoring them as closely as they should be," Guear said.

In July, del Valle filed a federal Title IX complaint, something he hadn't been aware he could do until the recent *Times* story.

An attorney from the Office of Civil Rights soon called. He said the conversation lasted more than an hour. But in August, he got an email notifying him his concerns would not be investigated. Students were required to make complaints within 180 days, the letter said.

He was surprised, he said, and crushed. He had let himself hope again.

Contact Bethany Barnes at bbarnes@tampabay.com. Follow @BetsBarnes.

federal government for not following the law that was supposed to protect students from exactly these situations. The findings back then were familiar to his own observations: poorly trained educators, not enough done to make sure students knew their rights under Title IX, a student retaliated against for reporting inappropriate sexual behavior.

According to the federal government, it was still "actively monitoring" Hillsborough. Hillsborough had told the *Times* it wasn't being monitored. But after repeated questions over several months, the district clarified that its position is based on the fact that it hasn't heard from the Office of Civil Rights about the agreement since 2014. That year, the agency sent a letter that Hillsborough's efforts were not good enough. The district had just adopted new policies that it believed addressed the government's concerns. It later complained in writing about the

slow process and asked for guidance it could immediately adopt if there were any deficiencies in the changes that had been made. According to the district, it never heard back.

"We want this blessed, and if it isn't right, tell us what is," said Verra-Tirado, the district's chief of equity, diversity and inclusion. From what she can tell, the open case is a technicality. "Since it's not closed, they can't say they're not monitoring."

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights has ignored repeated requests from the *Times* since June to talk about its oversight. It's also refusing to release records that would show exactly what the agency has done to hold Hillsborough accountable over the past decade.

Nan Stein, a senior research scientist at the Wellesley Centers for Women who has spent more than 30 years studying sexual harassment in schools, said if the Office of Civil Rights is dragging its feet,

students experience a disintegration of their rights. And they lose leverage.

"I think it takes a lot of noise to move school districts," she said.

Asked what the district should be communicating to the public, she said, "Contribution."

The district needs a way to scrutinize its own conduct and look closely at its training, she said. And they need to listen to students and families, she said. One option could be public hearings.

The district has done student surveys for years that include questions about harassment. The surveys were required by the federal government. The district recently changed vendors, something Hillsborough chief of staff Michael McAuley says will allow for more analysis.

The survey results are not published online, but the district shared some with the *Times*. Students answer on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree, and Panorama, the system

About the story

This investigation is based on numerous documents. Reporter Bethany Barnes reviewed Rufus del Valle's emails with district officials. Del Valle's complaint mentioned a specific boy who'd been accused of misconduct and a search of his police record turned up two investigations of rape allegations at the high school. Those police reports informed our reporting and noted that, in both incidents, the girls had been suspended. Barnes also reviewed related court records. These included the attempt to get a restraining order and the criminal case that resulted from the second incident.

To corroborate what happened with the boy who tried to warn the school about another student, Barnes reviewed the boy's discipline records, which he provided. Barnes also obtained the group chat the boy created with girls who told him they'd experienced unwanted behavior from that student. Alexandra Reyes, one of the girls in the chat, provided those messages. Barnes also reviewed the district's policies and training on Title IX, as well as the district's communications with the federal government on the matter.

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