

A new law signed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo makes it mandatory.



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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

School coaching was added to the list of occupations required by the state to report possible child abuse to authorities.

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If Andrew Delva, the teacher, suspects a student is a victim of child abuse, he has to report it. That's the law in the state.

"You look to see if a kid is standoffish, a kid that doesn't want to be touched if people are being around them," said Delva, a special ed teacher at Spring Valley High who also coaches its varsity football and track and field teams as well as the modified track and field program for the Chestnut Ridge Middle School boys and girls.

"I look to see how they dress, if the kid is always coming in hungry. You ask what's going on at home."

Now Delva, the coach, will be required to have the same responsibility. Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed legislation on Aug. 6 that places school sports coaches among the occupations that have to report any suspicions of child abuse to authorities.

"I probably would've done it anyway, even without the law," Delva said.

The new law, which was sponsored by Assemblywoman Amy Paulin of Scarsdale, requires school coaches to have been trained for two hours in seeing the signs. Teachers are already required to take a course on child abuse for certification, but not every coach is also a teacher.

The athletes, in theory, could also confide about a problem at home to their coach whether or not the coach spots physical or emotional symptoms.

"I think for the most part if they have a solid foundation and relationship with the coach, I think that would be something they could have conversation (about) and be able to confide," said Pat Driscoll, a special ed teacher and cross country and track and field coach at Tappan Zee.

"But at the same time, I think if the athlete is kind of quiet and the coach is not as personable, then, yeah, I think it would be a little more difficult."

Liam Frawley, the director of athletics for the South Orangetown Central School District, noted the substantial amount of time spent with students.

"We're responsible for them in lieu of their parents when they're under our charge," Frawley said. "So I think it just adds to the responsibility that coaches and teachers have when parents put their trust in these people to look out for the best interest of their kids."

In the wake of Jerry Sandusky, the former Penn State football assistant coach, being convicted on child abuse charges and local incidents involving nonschool coaches, Dominick Sputo called the new mandate "a double-edged sword."

"I kind of question it a little bit because of all the negative stories and incidents with coaches over the years, your Sanduskys and the other guys that we've seen throughout the Westchester County area abusing their students, the people that go to them for lessons," said Sputo, a retired White Plains firefighter who had two daughters become all-state softball pitchers for White Plains High.

"The good part, yeah, more eyes looking; the bad part, false accusations or mistaken accusations and the history that we know of of coaches doing the abuse."

Pat Hogan was the head varsity softball coach at Kennedy for 15 years before serving as an assistant with Brewster the last two. The retired nurse took a course on child abuse and bullying in March.

"I think if anybody knows anything like that that's going on, they should report it," Hogan said about the child abuse.

Gary DiVico taught for 35 years before retiring after this past school year. He has coached in Sleepy Hollow's boys lacrosse program since 1980 and has been the head varsity coach since 1992. He said he has never come across a suspected case, but he isn't surprised by the added responsibility now.

"It's everywhere," DiVico said. "You have to do it in school. Even when you work for church groups now, you've got to sign all these forms, take these courses if you teach Sunday school. I just see it as a sign of the times. They've got to protect the kids."