

Right to Know, no exceptions

In the wake of the Penn State controversy, state lawmakers vow quick action on a flurry of bills to strengthen Pennsylvania's child abuse reporting laws.

Measures to expand the responsibility of mandated reporting of child abuse to colleges and universities, as well as increasing the penalties for failure to report child abuse, obviously are overdue. Such measures could help take child predators out of circulation sooner or, even, prevent child abuse.

But there's one other change to Pennsylvania law that is needed.

By lawmakers' amending the state's Right to Know Law to remove the exemption for Penn State and three other state-related universities, the public and the press would have access to important information currently off limits to them.

It is the sort of information -- emails, phone records and the like -- that state universities and state agencies routinely are required to divulge under the state's Right to Know Law.

The Right to Know Law, once one of the nation's weakest, was substantially rewritten and strengthened by the Legislature in 2009 -- with one exception whose significance is only recently being made clear.

Then-PSU President Graham Spanier and the heads of the three other state-related universities -- institutions that receive taxpayer money but maintain independent administrative control -- had successfully lobbied lawmakers to exclude their institutions.

At the time, they claimed that, without it, they would have a harder time soliciting donors if the donors' identities became public, putting them at a competitive disadvantage with private universities.

But Pennsylvania taxpayers are donors, too, having given the state-related universities \$560 million this fiscal year, alone.

Besides, the 14 universities in the State System of Higher Education, including Millersville, have no such exemption.

Ending the exemption for the state-related universities likely would not have prevented what allegedly occurred at Penn State, but it could have served to tip off authorities sooner.

The Legislature ending the exemption -- provided it applies to past records, too -- could allow access to critical information that could further the public's understanding of what officials at Penn State knew and when they knew it.

Lawmakers should treat this with the same urgency as the other legislation.

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