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Worthy of the Trust: The Sledd Case and Safeguarding in Deaf Schools

Heather Grizzle · August 12, 2026

The Sledd case at the Oklahoma School for the Deaf raises questions of mandatory reporting, trust and accountability, without indicting Deaf schools.

The criminal case against former Oklahoma School for the Deaf teacher and coach Sean Thomas Sledd has moved forward following his surrender to authorities and release on a $275,000 bond. As the legal process continues, a separate and important discussion is developing within the Deaf community about institutional responsibility, mandatory reporting, community trust, and the future of schools for the Deaf.

That discussion requires precision. Criminal allegations against one employee do not establish that the Oklahoma School for the Deaf, residential Deaf education, or schools for the Deaf generally are inherently unsafe. Sexual abuse is not unique to Deaf schools, and using an individual criminal case as evidence that Deaf schools should be closed would ignore both the broader prevalence of abuse across educational settings and the distinctive role Deaf schools play in the lives of many Deaf children. These institutions can provide direct language access, culturally responsive education, Deaf peers and adult role models, extracurricular opportunities, and a sense of community that many Deaf students do not find in mainstream settings.

None of that, however, should place Deaf institutions beyond scrutiny. Supporting Deaf education does not require shielding an institution from legitimate questions about how it protects students. If anything, the importance of Deaf schools creates a stronger obligation to ensure that their safeguarding systems are credible, accessible, independent, and capable of functioning when allegations involve people with substantial standing inside the community.

The allegations involving Sledd illustrate why institutional governance matters. Publicly available state records indicate that his relationship with the Oklahoma School for the Deaf extended well beyond ordinary employment. State archival material identifies him as an OSD student as early as 2011. He later returned to the school as an educator and coach and built a prominent athletic profile. In November 2024, Superintendent Heather Laine publicly praised Sledd and his coaching staff following the school's third consecutive Great Plains Schools for the Deaf football championship. By

January 2025, OSD was reporting his National Deaf Interscholastic Athletic Association Division II Coach of the Year recognition to the Oklahoma Commission for Rehabilitation Services.

That history is relevant not because it establishes wrongdoing by anyone else, but because safeguarding systems must account for how power actually operates in small, closely connected communities. Institutional power is not confined to organizational charts. A person may acquire substantial informal authority through longevity, reputation, athletic success, alumni status, family ties, professional relationships, or years of community involvement. When one person combines several of those sources of authority, students and colleagues may experience that person very differently from an ordinary employee.

This matters particularly in Deaf institutions, where professional, educational, cultural, athletic, and social networks overlap. A former student may become a teacher. A teacher may become a coach. Coaches, administrators, alumni, parents, interpreters, advocates, and community leaders may know one another across multiple settings. Those relationships are often among the strengths of Deaf communities, but from a governance perspective they can also make reporting misconduct socially complicated. A safeguarding system designed only around formal supervisory authority may therefore miss significant forms of informal influence. None of this means close Deaf communities are inherently dangerous. It means institutions serving them need safeguards designed for the communities they actually serve.

When allegations involve a respected or deeply connected person, institutional loyalty can further complicate the response. Community members may struggle to reconcile serious allegations with years of positive experiences with the individual. Criticism of a particular school may be perceived as criticism of Deaf education itself, especially given the long history of Deaf people having to defend Deaf schools, sign language, and Deaf-led educational spaces against closure, consolidation, and policies imposed without meaningful Deaf participation.

That history deserves recognition, but institutional defense cannot become a substitute for institutional accountability. The choice is not between protecting Deaf schools and protecting Deaf children. A sustainable Deaf educational system must do both.

For that reason, the central governance question raised by this case is not whether schools for the Deaf are good or bad. The more useful question is what safeguards

Deaf schools need so that students can report misconduct safely and concerns cannot disappear because the person involved is respected, connected, successful, or institutionally important.

Those safeguards should include clearly defined mandatory-reporting procedures, accessible reporting mechanisms for students, documented escalation requirements, protection against retaliation, independent channels outside a student's immediate school hierarchy, and relationships with organizations capable of providing culturally and linguistically accessible victim advocacy. Institutions should also periodically test whether those mechanisms work in practice. A policy sitting in an employee handbook is not the same as a functioning safeguarding system.

The distinction between individual misconduct and institutional responsibility is especially important in the Sledd case because significant factual questions remain unresolved. The Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services has stated that Sledd was removed from campus when officials became aware of the police investigation. Earlier reporting by KFOR, however, indicated that police were investigating whether other people may have known about the alleged relationship and failed to act. According to KFOR's description of the police report, a staff member allegedly witnessed physical behavior involving Sledd and the student and confronted him.

Those allegations do not establish that school administrators knew about the conduct. They do not show that any particular employee violated Oklahoma's mandatory-reporting requirements, and they should not be treated as proof of institutional wrongdoing before the underlying facts are known. They do, however, make the reporting chain a legitimate subject of inquiry.

If a staff member witnessed conduct concerning enough to confront an employee, what happened afterward matters. Investigators and oversight authorities may need to determine when the alleged incident occurred, whether it was documented, whether anyone else was informed, whether a mandatory report was required, whether one was made, and what procedures existed for escalating concerns about someone with substantial community standing. Those are factual questions, and they should be answered through evidence rather than speculation.

This distinction is essential to responsible governance. Accountability does not mean assigning institutional guilt before an investigation is complete. It means preserving the ability to ask difficult questions, build a reliable chronology, determine who knew

what and when, evaluate whether existing safeguards functioned as intended, and correct failures if the evidence shows they occurred.

There is also a larger lesson here for Deaf institutions beyond Oklahoma. Accessibility and safeguarding cannot be treated as separate obligations. A child is not adequately protected merely because a generic reporting system technically exists. Reporting mechanisms must themselves be accessible. Deaf students need to be able to disclose concerns directly and confidentially in a language and communication mode they can use effectively, and they should not have to depend exclusively on the same interpersonal network in which the alleged misconduct occurred, particularly when the accused person holds significant formal or informal authority within it.

Independent oversight is therefore not an attack on Deaf autonomy. Properly designed, it can strengthen it. Deaf-led and Deaf-informed safeguarding structures, accessible external reporting channels, independent investigations, transparent reporting protocols, and partnerships with Deaf victim advocates all reduce the likelihood that accountability depends on personal relationships or institutional reputation.

The legal system will resolve the criminal allegations against Sledd through its own process. The Deaf community does not need to reach conclusions ahead of that process to have a serious conversation about governance. It is possible to reject attempts to portray sexual abuse as a problem unique to Deaf schools while insisting that Deaf institutions maintain rigorous safeguards. It is possible to defend the educational and cultural importance of schools for the Deaf while asking whether reporting procedures worked in a particular case. It is possible to respect due process for an accused person while examining the systems designed to protect children. Those positions are not contradictory. They are components of responsible governance.

Deaf children should not have to choose between language access, cultural belonging, educational opportunity, and safety. They are entitled to all of them. Protecting the institutions that provide those opportunities therefore requires more than defending their existence. It requires building systems strong enough to withstand scrutiny when something may have gone wrong. The goal is not to make Deaf schools immune from criticism. It is to make them worthy of the trust Deaf children and their families place in them.

TIPS

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