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Gaps in checking teaching credentials can miss predators

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By **Greg Toppo, USA TODAY**

Could JonBenet Ramsey murder suspect John Mark Karr get a job teaching in your community?

It's possible but unlikely, according to experts in school safety and teacher credentialing who say states and school districts are much more sophisticated about tracking teaching candidates' criminal pasts than they used to be.

While most now demand fingerprints and background checks, the system does have gaps, they say.

For instance, few child sex offenders have criminal backgrounds so they may never show up on background checks, says Richard Dangel, a child psychologist who heads Praesidium Inc., a Dallas consulting firm. "Only about 4% of offenders get busted," he says. "The other 96% don't."

Press reports suggest Karr's behavior raised eyebrows almost as soon as he began teaching a decade ago in Alabama, but he was able to find work elsewhere.

He first served as a substitute teacher in Hamilton, Ala., in 1996 but was fired, according to an affidavit later filed by his wife, "because he had a tendency to be too affectionate with children."

Marion County school superintendent Bravell Jackson said he removed Karr, a former Hamilton student, from the substitute list because of parents' complaints. But there was no evidence of criminal wrongdoing, Jackson said.

Karr and his wife moved to Petaluma, Calif., where he substitute taught from 2000 to 2001. He was arrested in April 2001 on five counts of possessing child pornography.

California suspended Karr's teaching credentials in 2002.

According to a resume Karr posted online, he taught in Asia, Central America and Europe from 2001 to 2005; he traveled from Malaysia to Thailand in June to look for work at a private school.

Roy Einreinhofer, executive director of the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, says the California suspension would have prevented Karr from teaching elsewhere in the USA.

"If he had lost his right to teach ... he would be on our database," says Einreinhofer. "If he went to apply for certification in another state, they would check against that database."

In a few states, it takes little to lose one's license. Failure to repay student loans can trigger the process.

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Einreinhofer says schools are getting better at routine checks, and technology is making the task easier and cheaper.

"Almost all states are now doing fingerprinting," he says. "That's a dramatic change from 15 or 20 years ago."

In Florida, for example, all school districts have electronic pads that compare applicants' fingerprints to an FBI database. Congress last month approved legislation that gives both public and private schools access to federal crime databases.

But even those with convictions may not raise red flags in such a background check, Dangel says. Good behavior in a sex abuse case can lead authorities to expunge a conviction from a person's record.

"If you're breathing a sigh of relief because you did a criminal background check, it's unjustified," he says.

Cleveland school safety consultant Ken Trump says Karr's ability to get a job in California demonstrates a weak point in the system: substitute teaching. Background checks are often less stringent, even though subs have equal access to kids.

"Where he really was able to manipulate the system in the U.S. was substitute teaching," Trump says.

Schools need to follow up on background checks and notice if a job candidate switches schools frequently, experts say. They also should carefully review applications for inconsistencies or omissions and administer new criminal checks when contracts come up for renewal.


"Some of these predators take years to cultivate the students who they've targeted," Einreinhofer says. "If we've got the bad people in there, we want to be sure we know who they are."

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