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Child Abuse at Penn State: The Former University President's Responsibility

By: Ben W. Heineman Jr.

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A report by former FBI director Louis Freeh confirms Graham Spanier's "total disregard" for Jerry Sandusky's victims.



Former FBI director Louis Freeh in this morning's press conference on the Penn State abuse report. (Reuters)

When Penn State's failure to report child abuse to law-enforcement authorities became public last November, it was soon apparent that a toxic culture of silence had supported protecting the university's football program instead of investigating allegations that then-assistant coach Jerry Sandusky had serially molested young boys. It soon after become apparent that the university's president, Graham Spanier, was ultimately responsible for this culture. (See [here](#), for example.)

In an exhaustive investigative report released today, former FBI Director Louis Freeh, retained by Penn State's trustees, confirms this distasteful failure of leadership, one that is all-too-frequent at the top of important institutions.

In prepared remarks for this morning's press conference, Freeh said:

Our most saddening and sobering finding is the total disregard for the safety and welfare of Sandusky's child victims by the most senior leaders at Penn State. The most powerful men at Penn State failed to take any steps for 14 years to protect the children who Sandusky victimized. Messrs. Spanier, Schultz, Paterno, and Curley never demonstrated, through actions or words, any concern for the safety and well-being of Sandusky's victims until after Sandusky's arrest[...]

Taking into account the available witness statements and evidence, it is more reasonable to conclude that, in order to avoid the consequences of bad publicity, the most powerful leaders at Penn State University -- Messrs. Spanier, Schultz, Paterno, and Curley -- repeatedly concealed critical facts relating to Sandusky's child abuse from the authorities, the Board of Trustees, Penn State community, and the public at large. Although concern to treat the child abuser humanely was expressly stated, no such sentiments were ever expressed by them for Sandusky's victims.

Former President Spanier is criticized especially for his complete failure to ask obvious questions, at various junctures, about whether Sandusky was abusing children. He is also criticized for failure to inform the Penn State board of directors of Sandusky incidents and allegations ("Mr. Spanier resisted the Board's attempt to have more transparency.[...] Mr. Spanier was unwilling to give the Board any more information about what was going on than what he was providing to the public"). And he is scorched for failing to direct implementation of a 1990 federal law -- the Clery Act -- requiring the "collecting and reporting of crimes such as Sandusky committed on campus." Says Freeh:

Indeed, on the day Sandusky was arrested, Penn State's Clery Act implementation plan was still in draft form. Mr. Spanier said that he and the board never even had a discussion about the Clery Act until November 2011.

[The full report](#) explicates these points regarding Spanier in greater detail. It also sharply criticizes the board of trustees for not having processes for risk assessment and for being far too deferential to Spanier when child abuse issues began to emerge. The report's ultimate conclusion is devastating: "From 1998-2011, Penn State's 'Tone at the Top' for transparency, compliance, police reporting and child protection was completely wrong, as shown by the inaction and concealment on the part of its most senior leaders[...]."

When the scandal broke, attention focused on a national figure, Coach Paterno. And there is plenty of damning information about Paterno in this report.

But, for me, its most profound message is the abject failure of leadership by the University President, whose obligation was to victims, not to football, and whose concern should have been the ultimate well-being of the University, not to its money-making and iconic football program.

Leaders of all institutions -- public and private -- should read this report as a cautionary tale of the profoundly adverse impacts of a culture of silence and indifference at the top.

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<http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/07/child-abuse-at-penn-state-the-former-university-presidents-responsibility/259737/>