

# Concern over rate of school rape

## Panel tells of cover-ups by many teachers and parents

**KEITH ROSS**

**T**HE high number of rapes of schoolgirls – by relatives, teachers and fellow pupils – has caused alarm among teachers and others.

The problem has been dramatically highlighted by reports of a 15-year-old schoolgirl allegedly raped by two pupils, aged 14 and 16, in Gauteng. The two were alleged to have drugged the girl and to have filmed the rape on a cellphone.

But high-profile cases like this are just the tip of the iceberg and many teachers report that the incidence of sexual abuse of children is growing.

They say the extent of the problem is hard to determine because cases are often covered up by the victims, teachers, school administrators and parents.

But they have no doubt the problem is very real and the chairman of the Moral Regeneration Movement, Bishop Smangalis Mkhathswa, has called for a return to positive, shared values as a solution.

It was important, he said, to have sound family and community values.

Mkhathswa was taking part in the SAfm Radio panel discussion programme the *After Eight Debate*. He told the panel,



which was discussing rape in schools, that the normal socialising institutions had an important role to play by instilling discipline, which had almost “gone down the drain”.

“But we must also find ways to detect quite early any sign of social pathologies or deviant behaviour.”

The justice system should also have “more teeth”.

“The police should – working with the community – take a much tougher line.”

Mkhathswa’s call for a return to social values was supported on the panel by Joan van Niekerk, national co-ordinator of Childline. She said children were exposed to much more explicit sexual behaviour today than a generation ago, without moral guidance.

There was an increase in the number of rape and abuse cases reported to her organisation, but this could be partly because of society’s greater awareness of the problem.

It was worrying, said Van Niekerk, that a recent study by the Human Sciences Research Council found that 14 percent of children interviewed re-

ported sexual harassment or abuse by their teachers.

“But even more concerning is that 34 percent of these children indicated sexual harassment or abuse by fellow pupils.”

Van Niekerk said the government departments involved were concerned about the problem.

“What we find is teachers protecting each other when abuse is reported by pupils, and teachers in some ways protecting pupils.

“We sometimes see pupils’ parents being paid damages instead of allowing the court case to go forward. We also see many teachers who don’t know their legal responsibilities. We see schools reluctant to expose things because of the harm it will do to the school’s name.”

Themba Ndlovu, communications manager of the South African Council of Educators, spoke of the need to get parents’ co-operation. His organisation was mainly concerned with liaising with teachers, but was aware of the important role parents had to play.

“Parents do sometimes contribute towards us not winning this battle because they hide these things from us.

“When the kids report these matters, the parents are sometimes prepared to collude with the perpetrators.”

