

Final Report of Investigation

Re: Stonington Public Schools Administration and Timothy Chokas

Submitted by:

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Simsbury, CT 06070**

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I. Introduction

This is the final report of my investigation into allegations that members of the Administration of the Stonington Public Schools, and other school staff, were aware of and ignored numerous allegations of inappropriate conduct towards students by Timothy Chokas (hereinafter “Chokas”), a teacher at Stonington High School until he resigned in January of 2019, effective June 30, 2019.

Origins of Investigation

Early in 2019, Chokas and the Stonington Public Schools negotiated a settlement agreement that allowed Chokas to utilize accrued paid sick time for the remainder of the 2018-2019 school year and resign thereafter. In June of 2019, soon after the graduation ceremony for Stonington High School seniors had been held, a number of stories appeared in the *New London Day*, a local print and online newspaper, concerning prior inappropriate conduct by Chokas towards a number of female students. Many of the allegations dated from the early 2000s; others were much more recent. The allegations included inappropriate physical contact with female students, in Chokas’s classroom during the school day, during practices while Chokas served as a soccer and golf coach, and in a darkroom adjacent to Chokas’s classroom while the classes he taught still required the use of a darkroom.¹ In addition, according to the reporting in the *New London Day*, a number of the individuals who spoke to the reporter indicated that school administrators had known of the allegations much earlier than 2017, when Chokas received a letter of warning about touching a female student on the golf team he was coaching with a golf club during a stretching regimen, and touching the same student on the shoulder during a class of

¹ The rise of digital photography ultimately did away with the use of the darkroom.

his in which she was enrolled. Allegations also appeared on the Stonington Community Forum, a Facebook page upon which Stonington residents comment on local and other matters.² All of the administrators currently employed by the Stonington Public Schools at Stonington High School and the Central Office denied knowledge of any incident of inappropriate conduct by Chokas towards any student prior to the 2017 incident at a golf practice discussed above.

Members of the community continued to express concern about the information contained in the stories published in the *New London Day* and on the Stonington Community Forum page. Additional stories appeared in the *New London Day* over the course of the summer and into the fall and winter of 2019, repeating some allegations from previous reporting, and also describing additional allegations. Members of the public addressed the Stonington Board of Education during the public comment portion of some Board meetings and requested that the Board take action.

Ultimately, on February 13, 2020, the Board met with Nick Caruso, a consultant with the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (“CABE”) to develop a rubric to guide an independent investigation of the Administration’s response to allegations that Chokas had behaved inappropriately with students over a number of school years. The Board set forth four questions for the chosen investigator to answer:

- 1) What happened?
- 2) Were the policies in place correct and followed?
- 3) Where and in what way did the communication breakdown occur, and why? and

² During the course of this investigation, the moderator approved my membership on the page. I am grateful for the cooperation, which provided me with an additional avenue to communicate with potential witnesses.

4) Identify whether climate issues contributed to the Chokas matter.

After interviewing three firms at its February 26, 2020 meeting, the Board selected Christine Chinni of Chinni & Meuser LLC in Avon, Connecticut, to conduct the investigation.³

II. Course of Investigation

Board Chairperson Alexa Garvey signed the engagement letter with Chinni & Meuser LLC on March 14, 2020. Soon thereafter, on March 15, 2020, Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont ordered all school districts in Connecticut to cease in-person operations and commence conducting instruction remotely, due to the threat from the novel Coronavirus, until at least March 31, 2020. The order included other restrictions on Connecticut residents, including the avoidance of non-essential travel and the maintenance of social distancing whenever possible. .

Because the investigator deemed in-person interviews preferable to remote interviews if possible, the investigator, in consultation with Chairperson Garvey, decided to wait until March 31st to commence interviews. The Board had provided the investigator with a voluminous record for review, and the investigator reviewed these documents thoroughly.⁴ Chinni & Meuser LLC also set up a dedicated email address on its webpage, spsinvestigation@chinniandmeuser.com to provide an extra layer of confidentiality to any witnesses who wished to give an interview as part of the investigation. The investigator planned to reach out via the website of the Stonington Board of Education with a press release, providing contact information and seeking information. The *New London Day* also agreed to publicize the investigator's information.

³ On April 3, 2020, Chinni & Meuser LLC moved to its current location at 14 Station Street, Simsbury, Connecticut.

⁴ The investigator reviewed voluminous email correspondence, Chokas's personnel file, documents that were sent to the Office of the Child Advocate, Board policies, and documents produced in connection with requests under the Freedom of Information Act. In all, the investigator reviewed hundreds of pages of documents.

Governor Lamont extended his orders regarding remote schooling and other lockdown essentials several times over the months after the Board retained Chinni & Meuser LLC to conduct the investigation.⁵ Ultimately, in consultation with the Board, the investigator determined that all interviews would have to proceed remotely.

Over the course of April 8 – July 29, 2020, the investigator conducted 32 interviews and five follow-up interviews. The investigator interviewed any witness or any other individual who contacted her to provide information. The investigator spent at least 50 hours conducting interviews.

The investigator interviewed the following school and district staff: Superintendent Dr. Van Riley; Assistant Superintendent Mary Anne Butler; Stonington High School Principal Mark Friese; Assistant Principal Neal Curland;⁶ Art Howe, a former teacher and former golf coach at Stonington High School;⁷ Stonington High School Assistant Principal of Margo Crowley; Stonington High School Associate Principal Alicia Dawe;⁸ Stonington High School Athletic Director Brian Morrone; and Director of Special Services Allison Van Etten.

I also interviewed a number of students and former students:⁹ a female 2017 graduate who took a class with Chokas (Student 1); a female 2005 graduate who had Chokas for a study hall period (Student 2); a female 2009 graduate who took a class with Chokas (Student 3); a female junior (now senior) at Stonington High School who took classes with Chokas in two

⁵ Governor Lamont ultimately extended the order requiring schools to remain closed and continue remote instruction until the end of the 2019-2020 school year.

⁶ Mr. Curland retired at the end of the 2019-2020 school year.

⁷ At the time of the interview, Mr. Howe was Dean of Students at Stonington Middle School.

⁸ At the commencement of the investigation, Ms. Dawe was Principal of West Vine Street Elementary School. At the time of the interview, she was Associate Principal, having assumed that position on July 1, 2020.

⁹ Students and graduates will not be identified by name; each will be designated as Student #. Similarly, parents and adult community members who wished to remain anonymous shall also be assigned a number.

consecutive years (Student 4); a female 2006 graduate who took a class with Chokas (Student 5); a female 2018 graduate who took classes with Chokas in two consecutive years (Student 6); a female 2017 graduate who took a class with Chokas (Student 7); a female 2011 graduate who took a class with Chokas (Student 8); a 2020 graduate who took a class with Chokas (Student 9); a female 2014 graduate who took a class with Chokas (Student 10); a female 2016 graduate who took a class with Chokas (Student 11); and a female 2008 graduate who took several classes with Chokas (Student 12).

I also spoke to several other adults, including Kate Milde, former staff member at Stonington High School; a parent of a female 2017 graduate (Parent 1); John Glenn, a member of the community who identified himself as a close friend of Chokas's; Candace Anderson, a former (then current) member of the Stonington Board of Education; Stonington Youth Services Officer Thomas Page;¹⁰ the parent of two recent graduates and one current student at Stonington High School (Parent 2); the parent of a 2020 graduate of Stonington High School (Parent 3); Maureen Masson, School Psychologist at Stonington High School; James Spellman, a former Stonington resident; and David Thomas, a parent of several graduates of, and one student currently enrolled in, Stonington High School.

A. Summary of Each Interview

Below, the investigator summarizes the information shared by each witness that is pertinent to the investigation, based upon the investigator's contemporaneous notes. This section does *not* necessarily reflect the investigator's conclusions, which appear in the "Findings"

¹⁰ Officer Page has since retired from the Stonington Police Department.

portion of the report. Rather, this section describes what each witness told the investigator, in one-on-one remote interviews conducted on Zoom or similar remote platforms.¹¹

1. Current and Former Staff Interviews

Superintendent Dr. Van Riley

Superintendent Riley was interviewed on April 8, 2020, via Google. Dr. Riley began his term in Stonington in October of 2012. The Stonington superintendency was Dr. Riley's first position in Connecticut; he had previously been superintendent in three California school districts. Dr. Riley was unaware of any issue with Chokas prior to 2014, when a parent of a student on the Stonington High School girls' soccer team complained about all of the coaches of the team, including Chokas.¹² The parent accused the then-head coach of being verbally abusive to the students on the team, and accused Chokas of having slapped a member of the team, not that parent's daughter, on her back. The parent did not identify the student who he alleged Chokas to have hit by name. Athletic Director Bryan Morrone interviewed the head coach, Chokas, and several members of the girls' soccer team. No one whom Athletic Director Morrone interviewed corroborated any of the parents' allegations. Mr. Morrone did learn that Chokas had carried a female soccer player off the playing field in 2013 but did so because the player was injured.

¹¹ The two exceptions are Athletic Director Bryan Morrone and former Stonington Police Youth Services Officer Tom Page. Stonington Education Association President Michael Freeman was present for Mr. Morrone's interview as his union representative; Stonington Town Attorney Brian Estep was present for Officer Page's interview.

¹² Dr. Riley subsequently recalled that this incident occurred in 2013, which was the recollection of both Athletic Director Morrone and Principal Mark Friese. I subsequently was able to identify the parent as Mr. Thomas. Dr. Riley indicated that Mr. Thomas did not provide him with the identity of the student/player in question. Mr. Morrone did not corroborate any of the information provided by Mr. Thomas during his interviews with the coaches and several players.

Dr. Riley was out of work on leave during most of the second semester of the 2016-2017 school year, recovering from open-heart surgery. However, he was in touch with Principal Mark Friese when an incident occurred between Chokas and a student¹³ who both was enrolled in a class with Chokas and was a member of the girls' golf team. Dr. Riley's recollection was that friends of the student had brought two issues forward to Assistant Principal of Guidance, Margo Crowley, who had informed Principal Friese. Ms. Crowley and Mr. Friese interviewed the student, who informed them that Chokas had touched her leg with a golf club during a stretching session at golf practice. The student also informed Mr. Friese and Ms. Crowley that Chokas touched her leg and rubbed her back in class. She asked that Mr. Friese take steps to get Chokas to stop. Chokas denied the allegations. Dr. Riley also recalled that Mr. Friese issued what Dr. Riley characterized as a "letter of concern" to Chokas, an action Dr. Riley supported. However, this letter indicated that while there had been several allegations concern Chokas's behaving inappropriately towards female students, none had been substantiated. The letter was placed in Mr. Friese's building file on Chokas, but not in his personnel file. Dr. Riley stated that, to the best of his knowledge, no student brought forward further allegations about Chokas prior to those brought forward in 2019.

In early 2019, Dr. Riley received a call from SHS Principal Mark Friese. Mr. Friese indicated that a student had come to him with allegations that Chokas deliberately, on more than one occasion, bumped up against her back in class. The student also alleged that Chokas had placed his knee on her thigh in class. Mr. Friese also informed Dr. Riley that, according to the student, Chokas had stated to the student's entire class: "If you have a problem with me, come to me. Don't go to the Administration." Dr. Riley viewed this statement from Chokas as an

¹³ This student did not present herself for an interview during the investigation.

attempt to engage the students in covering up his inappropriate conduct. Dr. Riley recalled that Chokas neither confirmed nor denied the allegations. Mr. Friese told Dr. Riley that he believed the student's allegations.

Dr. Riley believed that Chokas needed to leave the district after discussing the matter with Mr. Friese. Dr. Riley was convinced that Chokas "wouldn't or couldn't" change. Dr. Riley based his opinion in large part on the fact that Chokas had engaged in inappropriate contact with a student after receiving the 2017 letter of concern.

Dr. Riley consulted with the district's general counsel, Nicholas Grello of the New London law firm Zangari, Cohn, Cuthbertson, Duhl and Grello. Attorney Grello advised Dr. Riley and other members of his administrative team that, based upon what they had shared with him, there was insufficient evidence to prevail in a termination against Chokas, who was a tenured teacher. In consultation with Attorney Grello, Assistant Superintendent Mary Anne Butler, Mr. Friese, and Assistant Principal Neal Curland, Dr. Riley agreed to offer Chokas the opportunity to resign from his position effective June 30, 2019, in exchange for utilization of his accrued sick leave for the remainder of the 2018-2019 school year.

Assistant Superintendent Mary Anne Butler

Ms. Butler has served as Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction in the Stonington Public Schools from July, 2017 to the present time. Prior to coming to Stonington, Ms. Butler worked for the Connecticut State Department of Education, and served the Groton Public Schools and the Windsor Public Schools as Assistant Superintendent.

Although her primary focus is on curriculum and instruction, Ms. Butler does oversee some personnel matters, and consults with Dr. Riley and School Business Manager Gary Shettle

on others. Dr. Riley does consult Ms. Butler on significant matters as a member of his leadership team, and did so in 2017 and 2019 on the Chokas matter.

Ms. Butler recalled that Mr. Friese and Dr. Riley believed that Chokas had to receive written confirmation of the Administration's concerns about his conduct in 2017, and Ms. Butler agreed.

Ms. Butler viewed the 2019 incident, in which Chokas was alleged to have touched the same student while coaching her in golf and also while instructing her in class, as more serious than the alleged 2017 incident, for several reasons: the 2019 incident occurred after Chokas had received the 2017 letter of concern; like Dr. Riley, she believed that Chokas was either "incompetent or insubordinate" given his inability to follow Mr. Friese's direction in the letter of concern; and the 2019 incident demonstrated a serious lapse of judgment on Chokas's part, which Ms. Butler believed could not be remediated.

As described above, Ms. Butler took part in a meeting with Attorney Grello, Dr. Riley, Mr. Friese, Mr. Curland. Ms. Butler came away from the meeting convinced that the district did not have sufficient evidence to terminate Chokas, a tenured teacher. Ms. Butler concurred in the decision to offer Chokas the opportunity to resign from his position effective June 30, 2019, in exchange for utilization of his accrued sick leave for the remainder of the 2018-2019 school year.

Stonington High School Principal Mark Friese

Mr. Friese has been the Principal of Stonington High School for six years as of the end of the 2019-2020 school year. He became an educator after retiring from the Navy in 2002. His entire career in education has been in Stonington: first as a middle school math teacher; then as a high school math teacher. He then served as chairperson of the science, technology, engineering

and math (STEM) program; and 4 years as Assistant Principal of Stonington High School prior to becoming principal.

Mr. Friese had no concerns about Chokas, first as a colleague when Mr. Friese served as a high school math teacher and later as one of Chokas's supervisors as STEM chair, and Assistant Principal prior to the allegations that students brought forward about Chokas in 2017 and 2019. To the best of Mr. Friese's knowledge, Chokas was not the subject of gossip among teachers at Stonington High School. No colleague had expressed concerns about Mr. Chokas to Mr. Friese.

In 2017, Assistant Principal of Guidance Margo Crowley brought two students to Mr. Friese. These students spoke on behalf of a third student who believed that Chokas had behaved inappropriately towards her, both as a member of the golf team and as a student in one of Chokas's classes.

Ms. Crowley and Mr. Friese jointly interviewed the third student, the alleged victim. She indicated that Chokas had touched her legs with a golf club during a stretching exercise at a golf practice. She indicated that he had also massaged her back and placed his knee on her leg while apparently assisting her with seat work at a computer in class, with other students present. He also asked her questions about her relationship with her boyfriend. The student indicated that Chokas had been a teacher she liked, but that her friends had persuaded her that Chokas's behavior towards her was inappropriate, and that she should tell the Administration about it. She told Mr. Friese and Ms. Crowley that Chokas "creeped her out," and that she "wanted him to stop." When Ms. Crowley and Mr. Friese asked the student if she wanted to be removed from the class, she indicated that she "just wanted him to stop."

Mr. Friese indicated that the situation with Chokas and this student “made him mad.” He had had two other complaints about Chokas: an anonymous phone call in which the caller provided no specifics or leads, but said that Chokas behaved badly; and a report from a board member who told him that the board member’s daughter stated that another female student, a friend of hers, had stated that Chokas had placed his hand on the friend’s thigh. Mr. Friese followed up with the friend and her family, who denied that the incident had occurred. Still, Mr. Friese thought that the prior incidents, while unsubstantiated or even disproven, rendered the 2017 incident a greater concern. However, he ultimately viewed Chokas’s conduct in the 2017 incident an invasion of the student’s personal space but did not view it as sexual, although Mr. Friese did indicate that he had received training on the district’s sexual harassment policy and procedures. He did not report it to Allison Van Etten, the district’s Title IX coordinator. He did not report the incident as potential child abuse or neglect to the Department of Children and Families, nor, after discussing the matter with Youth Services Officer Tom Page of the Stonington Police Department, did he believe it rose to the level of requiring a criminal investigation. Mr. Friese did not speak to Athletic Director Brian Morrone about firing Chokas as golf coach, or consider removing him as coach himself but did tell Head Boys’ Golf Coach Art Howe to “keep an eye on” Chokas.

For all of these reasons, Mr. Friese issued the letter of concern, and filed it in his building file. He made Dr. Riley, Ms. Butler, Mr. Curland and Ms. Crowley aware of it. He also checked in with the student involved in the 2017 incident, who indicated that there had been no further incidents with Chokas after the issuance of the letter of concern.

When the 2019 incident occurred, Mr. Friese decided as soon as he interviewed the student involved that Chokas “had to go.” He thought the entire incident was inappropriate, but

was particularly persuaded by the fact that Chokas had told the student's class that they should "come to [Chokas] first" and not go to the Administration, with concerns about Chokas's behavior, and the allegation that Chokas had touched the student on the thigh with his hand, which Mr. Friese deemed more serious than previous allegations about giving students back massages. He wanted Chokas "out the door" the day he heard of the incident, and Dr. Riley, Ms. Butler, Mr. Curland and Ms. Crowley all agreed. The day of the interview of the complainant was the last day Chokas was present at Stonington High School.

Mr. Friese described Chokas's behavior in his *Loudermill*¹⁴ hearing as "clueless," incapable of understanding why the matter was so serious, "oblivious" as to why his employment was in jeopardy. Mr. Friese described Mr. Curland's behavior in the *Loudermill* hearing as upset, shocked that Chokas was so incapable of understanding the gravity of his situation. Chokas's conduct in the *Loudermill* hearing reinforced Mr. Friese's determination that Chokas could not continue as a teacher at Stonington High School. Mr. Friese made this determination despite the lack of evidence of any additional incidents other than the 2017 incident.

Ms. Crowley also reported the matter to the Department of Children and Families ("DCF"). Mr. Friese was surprised and disappointed that DCF did not screen the complaint in for investigation.

Mr. Friese was in attendance at one of the meetings of the administrative team with Attorney Grello, and ultimately concurred that the district did not have sufficient evidence to prevail in a termination hearing. He supported the decision to settle the matter by providing

¹⁴ A *Loudermill* hearing is a meeting with a public employee accused of wrongdoing, or other cause for discipline, at which the employee has an opportunity to respond to the accusation(s) against him/her. In a union setting, such as Chokas's, the employee has the right to have a union representative present. See *Cleveland Board of Educ. v. Loudermill*, 470 U.S. 532 (1985).

Chokas with paid sick leave to the end of the 2018-2019 school year in exchange for his resignation effective June 30, 2019.

Mr. Friese also participated in referring Chokas to the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) for revocation of his teaching certificate. His understanding was that the CSDE did not pursue revocation in light of DCF's decision not to screen in the complaint for investigation.

Mr. Friese said that Chokas's resignation did not have an immediate effect on the climate at Stonington High School. However, he indicated that students had asked him after the fact whether he and others had known of Chokas's "creepiness" and "touchiness." He also noted that an outside organization, "Safe Futures," had been brought in to work with students, that a student leadership group had asked to meet with Safe Futures without him, and then asked to meet with him and asked that he "validate their concerns."

Mr. Friese indicated that he had learned a great deal from the 2019 incident and its aftermath. He indicated that he had been thinking of sexual harassment as more "student on student" in 2017, and even in 2019. He believes that the district has put systems in place to address any similar issue going forward. He was particularly focused on the appointment of Alicia Dawe, previously Principal of West Vine Street Elementary School in Stonington, as the new Associate Principal of Stonington High School.¹⁵ He also discussed the district's work with "Safe Futures". He stated that he believed that all staff had become more sensitized to issues of staff-on-student harassment and inappropriate behavior since Chokas's forced resignation in 2019. However, Mr. Friese also acknowledged that, in the time since Chokas's resignation, he

¹⁵ Mr. Curland retired at the end of the 2019-2020 school year, creating an administrative vacancy at Stonington High School.

had learned that a number of female students had been uncomfortable in his presence, and he expressed regret that the students, for whatever reason, did not come forward at the time, whatever the reason.

Allison Van Etten, Special Education Director and Title IX Coordinator

Ms. Van Etten has served for the past seven years as the Director of Special Services for the Stonington Public Schools. She has 25 years of service as an educator in the district, and attended the Stonington Public Schools from 4th grade through graduation.

Ms. Van Etten had no involvement with the 2017 incident, although she was the Title IX Coordinator at the time of the incident.¹⁶ She stated that, in retrospect, she believed she should have been involved. She also stated that no student had ever come to her to discuss any concerns about Chokas, although she was and continues to be identified as the Title IX Coordinator on the district's website, and in the district's Title IX/Sexual Harassment policy.

Ms. Van Etten was involved in the 2019 incident that led to Chokas's resignation. Mark Friese contacted her and asked her to come to Stonington High School the day he learned of Chokas's conduct towards the student. Ms. Van Etten stated that, by the time she arrived at the high school, Mr. Friese had already removed Chokas from the building. Ms. Van Etten did not interview any students directly, but did interview Mr. Curland and Ms. Crowley. She also read all the reports of interviews. She was most troubled by the fact that Chokas had expressly told at least one class not to go to the Administration with any concerns about him, but to come to him instead. She believed that Chokas should not continue to serve as a teacher at the high school.

¹⁶ Ms. Van Etten became the Title IX Coordinator when she was appointed Director of Special Services.

Later that year, she met with Mr. Friese's student leadership group and Safe Futures staff. The students in the group gave various reasons for not coming forward with their concerns about Chokas: 1) they believed that the adults at the high school already knew about Chokas's behavior, and, since he continued to work there, they assumed that the Administration condoned his conduct; 2) they were unsure of whom to approach with their concerns; and 3) they feared retaliation if they needed a passing grade in Chokas's class.

Based on all this information, Ms. Van Etten believed that the district needed to provide training to both administrators and students regarding Title IX. Each administrator in the district attended the State Department of Education's Title IX training, which is normally attended only by each school district's Title IX coordinator. Ms. Van Etten also recast the district's bullying complaint form to make it easier and clearer to fill out. Ms. Van Etten also plans to work with the new Associate Principal of the high school to further everyone's understanding of their roles and responsibilities under Title IX, and to promote a focus on student advocacy and self advocacy at all grade levels throughout the district.

Ms. Van Etten stated that she believed the district needed to provide clearer guidance to students regarding their rights to be free of behavior and conduct like Chokas's, and also more frequent reminders of those rights.

Assistant Principal of Guidance Margo Crowley

Ms. Crowley came to Stonington High School in 2015 as Director of Guidance. Her title became Assistant Principal of Guidance in 2015.

Ms. Crowley was involved in both the 2017 and 2019 incidents. She had not received any complaints from any students concerning Chokas prior to the 2017 incident, and no one, staff or student, had shared any concerns about Chokas with her.

In 2017, the two students who brought the matter to the attention of the Administration came directly to Ms. Crowley and informed her about Chokas's conduct towards their friend, the student who was both on the girls' golf team and a student in Chokas's class. Ms. Crowley then interviewed that student and asked that Mr. Friese join her. Ms. Crowley indicated that the student told her and Mr. Friese that Chokas had touched her on the shoulder on two occasions and also touched her leg with a golf club during a stretching session at a golf practice. The student also indicated that Chokas asked her about her relationship with her boyfriend in a way that made her uncomfortable. Ms. Crowley indicated that she and Mr. Friese asked the student if she wanted to be removed from the class, and she stated that she did not; she just wanted them to know about it, and wanted it to stop. She did not ask the student to provide a written statement. The student's manner in the meeting did not convey that she was greatly concerned about Chokas's conduct.

Ms. Crowley stated that she and Mr. Friese conferred after meeting with the student, and that Mr. Friese decided to write the letter of concern. Neither she nor Mr. Friese considered Chokas's behavior as a potential violation of Title IX or as sexual harassment, just inappropriate. Ms. Crowley did indicate that she had received training on the district's sexual harassment policy and procedures. She had no further significant interactions with the student.

In 2019, the then-career coordinator at the high school, Kate Milde, brought two girls to see her to discuss Chokas's behavior toward a third girl. Ms. Crowley had that third student

brought to her office to discuss the matter. The student did not know the reason Ms. Crowley wanted to see her at the outset of the meeting but did readily tell Ms. Crowley about Chokas's behavior towards her that made her uncomfortable. The student indicated that Chokas had placed his knee on her thigh on at least two occasions during class, and had asked her personal questions about her relationship with her boyfriend, and with boys in general. The student also indicated that Chokas had told her class that, if any student had a problem with him, they should come to him, not the Administration. Ms. Crowley went to the cafeteria to get Mr. Curland, who came to her office with Mr. Friese. The student provided a written statement confirming what she had told Ms. Crowley.

Mr. Friese and Mr. Curland then met with Chokas and arranged for him to leave the building. At the same time, Ms. Crowley called and reported the matter to DCF. She also called the student's mother.

Ms. Crowley deemed the 2019 incident to be more serious than the 2017 incident, for several reasons. First, she believed that touching a student's thigh was more serious than Chokas's conduct with the student from the 2017 incident. Second, the student's manner once she began relating the incident to her indicated to Ms. Crowley that the student was quite upset by the incident. Third, Ms. Crowley believed that the statement the student reported Chokas as having made about not complaining to the Administration seemed to indicate that Chokas himself knew that his conduct was inappropriate and might place him in jeopardy.

Ms. Crowley was among the administrators in attendance at Chokas's *Loudermill* hearing. She stated to him: "The student was relieved after speaking with me." Ms. Crowley's impression was that Chokas was "clueless" as to the seriousness of the matter. Ms. Crowley

reported that Mr. Friese reminded Chokas of the 2017 letter of concern. Chokas finally stated that he understood “the world we live in.”

Ms. Crowley was not part of the process of negotiating Chokas’s departure, but agrees that he had to leave Stonington High School after the 2019 incident.

Assistant Principal Neal Curland

Mr. Curland came to Stonington High School in 2014 as an Assistant Principal. He had previously worked in five other school districts in various capacities. Mr. Curland indicated that he was aware of and had been trained on the district’s sexual harassment policy and procedures.

Mr. Curland indicated that he had received no complaints or expressions of concern about Chokas prior to the 2017 incident. He was not directly involved in the investigation of the 2017 incident, but was aware of the allegations and the letter of concern, and discussed the matter after the fact with both Mr. Friese and Chokas. Mr. Curland understood the allegations against Chokas from 2017, that Chokas had: touched the student’s leg with a golf club during a golf team practice stretching exercise; and touched her on the shoulder. Mr. Curland understood that Mr. Friese had put a letter of concern in Chokas’s building file, and told him that if he was involved in another incident with a female student, he “was gone.” Mr. Curland believed that he had a good relationship with Chokas, and met with him to reiterate that any further incident with a female student would result in Chokas’s being forced out of his position at Stonington High School. Mr. Curland did not consider recommending Chokas’s removal as golf coach for the incident with the golf club, but believed that Mr. Friese had spoken to Art Howe, the boys’ golf coach, about the incident. He did not inform the Athletic Director [who evaluates coaches] of the

incident at the golf practice, but agreed in retrospect that that might have been a good course of action.

Mr. Curland was involved in the investigation and outcome of the 2019 incident. He indicated that the meeting at which the incident was first discussed was very uncomfortable for all of the administrators involved. Mr. Friese, Ms. Crowley and Mr. Curland were all shocked that Chokas had been “so stupid” after having received the letter of concern in 2017. Mr. Curland was also surprised that his conversations with Chokas after the 2017 incident had not convinced him of the jeopardy he would be in if he engaged in any questionable behavior again.¹⁷

Mr. Curland was also present in Chokas’s *Loudermill* hearing. Dr. Riley, Mr. Friese, and Attorney Grello all spoke in the meeting. Chokas eventually stated that he understood the seriousness of his behavior, and Mr. Curland thought he would resign, although he left the hearing without doing so. Attorney Grello then informed the administrators at the meeting that the 2017 and 2019 incidents and the evidence the district had was not sufficient to terminate Chokas, given the process for terminating a tenured teacher. Mr. Curland agreed with the ultimate resolution of the matter – allowing Chokas to resign at the end of the 2018-2019 school year after utilizing his accumulated sick leave for the remainder of the school year. Mr. Curland believes that the district dealt with Chokas in a “swift and strong” manner, and emphasized that, from the day that the student in the 2019 incident came forward, Chokas was permanently removed from his teaching position at Stonington High School.

¹⁷ Mr. Curland also noted that, during his many informal observations of Chokas’s teaching, his behavior was entirely appropriate towards all students.

Dean of Students at Stonington Middle School and Former Golf Coach Art Howe

Mr. Howe indicated that Chokas had been an assistant golf coach for a combined boys' and girls' golf team, and was the coach of a separate girls' golf team during the 2016-2017 school year, the only year that the girls' team was in existence.¹⁸ Chokas was completely separate from the boys' team during the 2017-2017 school year, and Mr. Howe did not see himself as Choka's supervisor that year.

Mr. Howe acknowledged that Mr. Friese had spoken to him about Chokas after the 2017 incident, but stated that Mr. Friese told him to keep an eye on the girls' team, and made no specific reference to the student who had filed the complaint. Mr. Howe also stated that he had informed Mr. Friese that he "did not have eyes on" the girls' team's practices.

Mr. Howe had no involvement in the 2019 incident, as he was assigned to the middle school as Dean of Students during the 2018-2019 school year.

Mr. Howe indicated that before he had been Dean of Students at the middle school, he had been a business teacher at the high school. At that time, he considered Chokas a colleague and a friend. Mr. Howe also stated that he never heard any rumors, let alone complaints, about Chokas's conduct towards students while Mr. Howe taught at the high school. He also indicated that he had worked with Kate Milde when they were both assigned to the high school, and that she had never told him anything about Chokas's behaving inappropriately towards any student.

¹⁸ When the students who had been on the girls' team stated that they did not wish to participate in 2017-2018, Mr. Howe approached one of them to ask why. She stated that Chokas "made it seem too much like a competitive sport" and said Chokas "took all the fun out of it."

Athletic Director Bryan Morrone

Mr. Morrone was accompanied by Michael Freeman, President of the Stonington Education Association, during his interview. He became the Athletic Director in 2006. Prior to that time, Mr. Morrone was a physical education teacher at Stonington High School.

Mr. Morrone recalled that, at the end of the 2013-2014 girls' soccer season, a parent informed him that Chokas had lifted a girl in his arms at the end of a game. The parent who came to Mr. Morrone about this issue was not the parent of the student in question. Mr. Morrone concluded that Chokas had lifted a player and carried her off the field, but had done so because the player was injured and needed to be removed from the field. The parent who raised this complaint had numerous complaints about all aspects of the girls' soccer program.¹⁹

Mr. Morrone heard no other complaints about any alleged inappropriate behavior by Chokas as a soccer coach.

Mr. Morrone explained that Chokas had been an assistant golf coach on a team that included both boys and girls, and that, in 2017, there were four girls who wanted to play golf, which allowed for the creation of a separate girls' team that year. Mr. Morrone stated that he had never heard any concerns about Chokas being "creepy," touching students inappropriately, or making them uncomfortable. No one ever discussed the 2017 incident involving Chokas and the female golf player at the practice with Morrone. He had no concerns at all about Chokas, was surprised about the 2019 incident and the fact that he left the district, and had expected him to return as assistant golf coach during the 2019-2020 school year.

¹⁹ Based upon a followup interview with Superintendent Riley and an interview with David Thomas, I determined that the parent to whom Mr. Morrone was referring was Mr. Thomas.

School Psychologist Maureen Masson

The investigator interviewed Ms. Masson by phone, as she stated she did not have internet access. Ms. Masson has been employed by the Stonington Public Schools as a school psychologist for 22 years.

Ms. Masson expressed great skepticism regarding the claims that former students have made since the Chokas matter first appeared in the *New London Day* in 2019. Ms. Masson stated that, in her role as school psychologist, she has worked with many students who have experienced trauma, and those students have spoken freely and openly with her. She believes that, if the students had experienced the inappropriate behavior from Chokas that they claimed, they would have come to her. Ms. Masson stated emphatically that no student had ever come to her with concerns about Chokas.

She also indicated that she had been close to Kate Milde, the Career Center Coordinator, during Ms. Milde's employment at the high school. Ms. Masson indicated that she had worked to reduce what Ms. Milde claimed was her "isolation" from the rest of the staff. She expressed skepticism about Ms. Milde's recent statements concerning students coming to Ms. Milde with concerns about Chokas. Ms. Masson indicated that, given the close relationship she had with Ms. Milde during her employment in Stonington, and given Ms. Milde's understanding of Ms. Masson's job as a school psychologist, Ms. Milde would have brought the students who told her of inappropriate conduct by Chokas to Ms. Masson. Ms. Masson stated that Ms. Milde had never done so.

Associate Principal Alicia Dawe

The investigator interviewed Stonington High School Associate Principal Alicia Dawe as part of the follow-up interviews conducted with school administrative staff.²⁰

Ms. Dawe's position was created in order to help address the student issues that have come out during the Chokas matter. She and Title IX Coordinator Allison Van Etten have instituted Title IX training for all students, based upon a model developed by the Connecticut State Department of Education. Ms. Dawe shared materials with the investigator that will be put in place at all grade levels in the district to make certain that the students know and understand their rights under Title IX and state and federal sexual harassment laws. The materials included interactive curriculum materials designed to inform students fully of their rights under Title IX and state and federal sexual harassment laws.

Former Career Center Coordinator Kate Milde

Ms. Milde contacted the investigator by phone. She was employed by the Stonington Public Schools from 2016-2019 as the Career Center Coordinator in the guidance department.

Ms. Milde indicated that the student involved in the 2017 incident came to her with a friend. Ms. Milde then referred the matter to Mr. Curland and Ms. Crowley. She praised the way they had handled the matter, stating that they "got on it immediately."

Ms. Milde indicated that she had heard rumors that Chokas was "creepy," but did not take them seriously. She indicated that none of these rumors described any specific actions by

²⁰ At the time of the initial interviews, Ms. Dawe was still employed as an elementary school principal. She assumed her new position on July 1, 2020, upon Mr. Curland's retirement.

Chokas. She also indicated that she had no information about staff or students raising complaints, concerns or any other information about Chokas's inappropriate actions or touching of students prior to the 2017 incident.

Ms. Milde did speak about the Chokas issue at a Stonington Board of Education meeting on January 23, 2020, in support of the students coming forward. She stated that, after doing so, a school psychologist at Stonington High School, Maureen Masson, sent her a text "WTF," and that Ms. Milde felt threatened by Ms. Masson. Ms. Milde ultimately went to the police with her concerns about Ms. Masson and obtained a no-contact order.

Stonington Police Department Youth Services Officer Tom Page²¹

Officer Page was, at the time of his interview, the Youth Services Officer for the Stonington Police Department, assigned to all schools in Stonington, including private schools. Stonington Town Attorney Brian Estep was present for Officer Page's interview.

Officer Page was involved in matters concerning Chokas on two occasions, in 2017 and 2019. On both occasions, Stonington High School staff came to discuss the matters with him after the high school staff had completed their investigations. On both occasions, Officer Page informed the high school administrators that the matters were "employment, not criminal." In 2017, Officer Page indicated that, as he understood it, Chokas had rubbed a female student's shoulders, and had also touched her leg with a "golf stick." Officer Page's understanding of the

²¹ Although Officer Page was not an employee of the Stonington Board of Education at any time, he acted in an official capacity on behalf of the Town, so the investigator has summarized his interview here.

2019 issue was that Chokas had asked a female student to hold books and leaned very closely into her.²²

Officer Page indicated that, during the six years he worked in the schools in Stonington, he heard no other complaints about inappropriate conduct by Chokas. Officer Page also indicated that, given his frequent and visible presence at Stonington High School, and his visibility to and good relationships with many students there, he believed that both students and the Administration would have come to him had there been additional complaints.

2. Current and Former Student Interviews

As indicated in the introduction to this report, the students interviewed by the investigator will be identified by number and a brief demographic description, rather than by name, to protect their rights to privacy.

Student 1

Student 1 is a female 2017 graduate who took a class with Chokas. She indicated that her older sister had told her that Chokas was “a very touchy” teacher. Her sister also told Student 1 that, if Chokas liked a student, his classes were “an easy A.”

Student 1 stated that Chokas would come up behind her in class and touch and massage her shoulders during the 2016-2017 school year. On at least two occasions, Chokas placed his knee on her thigh while looking at the computer screen on her desk. She recalled an occasion in

²² Officer Page indicated that he was not aware of the allegation that Chokas had placed his thigh on a female student’s leg in 2019.

the Spring of 2017 when Chokas saw her online shopping and opined about what clothes he's like to see on her.

Student 1 did not tell anyone in the Administration about Chokas's behavior towards her. However, she opined that "every teacher knew" about Chokas. She stated: "We all just thought that that was who he was," and said that he made inappropriate statements in virtually every class period so "someone must know."

Student 1 also indicated that Chokas talked openly in class about his ongoing marital problems, and would seek student advice about it. On one occasion, Student 1 indicated that Chokas asked for advice on planning "the perfect getaway" for himself and his wife.

Student 1 stated that, had she wanted to report Chokas's inappropriate behavior, she would not have known to whom she should report it. She recalled going over school policies at her freshman orientation, including the district's sexual harassment policy, but stated that the emphasis was on student-on-student harassment. Student 1 also indicated that she did not know who the district's Title IX coordinator was and believed that Title IX was solely about access to sports.

Student 2

Student 2 is a female 2005 graduate who had Chokas for a study hall period. She did not see Chokas behave inappropriately and did not experience any inappropriate behavior herself. Student 2 also indicated that several of her friends had classes with Chokas and none of them complained to her about any inappropriate statements or conduct by Chokas. Student 2 did indicate that Chokas would occasionally tap female students on the shoulder in study hall.

Student 3

Student 3 is a female 2009 graduate who took a class with Chokas. She took courses with Chokas in all four of her years at the high school.

Student 3 stated that Chokas had been her favorite teacher at Stonington High School. She always felt comfortable and valued in Chokas's classes. Student 3 indicated that she had been alone in the dark room with Chokas on several occasions, and that he had never touched her in any way on those occasions. Student 3 indicated that Chokas had touched her shoulder, arm and elbow, and those of other female students, regularly. Student 3 characterized this touching as "friendly" and "innocent."

Student 3 stated she felt that she had to come forward out of fairness to Chokas. She stated that she believed the allegations regarding Chokas had been blown out of proportion due to the "Me, Too" movement.

Student 4

Student 4 is a female junior (now senior) at Stonington High School who took classes with Chokas in two consecutive years.

Student 4 indicated that she took Chokas's photography class as a Freshman. She found his manner "too friendly," but she enjoyed the class.

Student 4 indicated that, during her sophomore year, she took a smaller, "more intimate" class with Chokas, and stated that he "crossed a line," and caressed her back and shoulders on more than one occasion. She stated that it was unnecessary and made her uncomfortable. Student 4 stated that the students in the class she took with Chokas during her sophomore year

were mostly males, but Chokas focused nearly all of his attention on her. The attention got worse over the course of the school year; her classmates told her repeatedly that Chokas's conduct towards her was inappropriate. Ultimately, a male classmate reported the incident to Guidance. Student 4 stated that she wished she had reported Chokas herself, but was grateful that someone had done so.

Student 4 indicated that she was comfortable reporting Chokas's actions to Ms. Crowley, who she knew well, and felt that Ms. Crowley took Chokas's inappropriate behavior very seriously, once Student 4's friend had informed Ms. Crowley about it. She stated that Ms. Crowley helped her to understand how serious Chokas's conduct was. Student 4 described Ms. Crowley as "great, caring," and "shocked that this had happened." Student 4 also indicated that Ms. Crowley checked in with her periodically for the rest of the school year after the incidents occurred and Chokas left the high school.

Student 4 stated that there was a subsequent meeting with herself, her parents, Mr. Friese, Mr. Curland and Ms. Crowley. The school Administration told her and her parents that Chokas was "gone." She felt angry after this meeting, and wished she had not had to be "the one" to come forward. She stated that talking about Chokas's inappropriate touching of her with the two male administrators made her uncomfortable.

Student 4 stated that she had heard rumors that Chokas had sexually assaulted a female student and that the district had taken no action. For that reason, she believed that there was no point in her reporting Chokas's actions towards her. Student 4 acknowledged that the sexual assault allegations were rumors, and that no one who claimed to have firsthand knowledge about them ever confirmed them.

Student 4 indicated that high school staff discussed school policies during an assembly each year, including sexual harassment policies, but that these presentations had not conveyed to her what steps she should have taken in connection with Chokas's inappropriate touching of and comments to her. She stated that a presentation by Officer Thomas Page, the Youth Services Officer, in 2019, after Chokas had left, was more explicit, but it caused her to have a panic attack.

Student 5

Student 5 is a female 2006 graduate who took a class with Chokas.

Student 5 took a class with Chokas during the spring semester of her senior year. She believes that Chokas was a fairly new teacher at that time.²³ She had heard other students say that he would touch and hug students in class. Student 5 indicated that Chokas would give female students in the class, including herself, back rubs and shoulder massages. She stated that some students would "sink down in their seats" to avoid Chokas, and, when this occurred, Chokas would say "What's the big deal?" or "Everyone is so sensitive."

Student 5 did not report Chokas's touching and massaging of her back and shoulders to anyone at school. She felt that her complaint would not be taken seriously, and that Chokas's behavior was "normalized." She did not cite any specific action or statement supporting her feeling that Chokas's behavior was "normalized," but stated twice that she felt that way. She and other students avoided being alone with Chokas in the dark room.

²³ Chokas was hired by Stonington in 2003, for the 2003-2004 school year.

Student 5 stated that she knew Chokas's conduct towards herself and others was wrong, but did not tell anyone about it at the time. She considered telling "a trusted teacher" about it, but decided against it. She stated that she came forward to support the other students who had done so.

Student 6

Student 6 is a female 2018 graduate who took classes with Chokas in two school years, her sophomore and senior years. She was one of only two female students in the class she took with Chokas during her senior year.

Student 6 stated that she never had any problems with Chokas, and never heard from anyone else who did. She found him to be one of the most understanding and caring teachers at Stonington High School. Even during her junior year, when she did not have a class with Chokas, she asked him about spending extra time in woodshop before or after school. In response, Student 6 says that Chokas told her that he was not allowed to be alone with female students.

Student 6 stated that she came forward because she felt it was important for the investigator, and anyone who would later have access to the report, hear from someone who was supportive of Chokas.

Student 7

Student 7 is a female 2017 graduate who took a class with Chokas. Student 7 had Chokas for photojournalism in the spring of her freshman year. She "fell in love with the class." Student 7 stated that, "at first," she didn't realize that Chokas was touching students in class.

Student 7 stated that Chokas allowed her to use black and white film. Student 7 stated that, on one occasion, Chokas followed her into the darkroom while she was developing film and locked the door. Student 7 stated that he then came up close behind her and touched her lower back. On a number of other occasions, Student 7 stated that Chokas had rubbed her back and shoulders in class. Student 7 also stated that Chokas had offered her a position as a teaching assistant in his class, and wanted her to stay after school in his classroom.²⁴

Student 7 said that “she didn’t think much” of Chokas’s behavior towards her until the end of the school year when she told her parents. Her mother told her she should speak with someone about it. She stated that she did go to either the guidance office or the Administration’s office at the high school on at least one occasion to discuss the matter with someone, but it seemed to her that “no one was available.” She believes she mentioned that she wanted to speak to someone about Chokas, perhaps to a secretary in the main office or guidance office. There was no record of any such contact, however. She could not state to whom she thought she made this statement. Soon thereafter, the school year ended and she did not attempt to speak with guidance again, or with a school administrator. Student 7 also indicated that she did not have an understanding of the proper channel for reporting Chokas’s behavior. She stated that she would have liked to continue in photojournalism, but did not do so because of Chokas.

Student 7 also indicated that, from what she recalled, the focus of any presentation to the student body about sexual harassment was focused on student-on-student behavior. Student 7’s concerns were later reported by the *New London Day*.

²⁴ As Student 7 graduated in 2017, this request predated the statement that Chokas made to Student 6 about not being permitted to be alone with female students.

Student 7 also described an encounter after an awards banquet at which Mr. Friese approached her father, after her concerns were printed in the *New London Day*. This event occurred after Student 7 had graduated. She stated that Mr. Friese approached her father and said: “I wish [Student 7] had come to me.” Student 7 was angry about Mr. Friese approaching her father. She stated that she didn’t know Mr. Friese well enough to approach him during her freshman year, and that, by the time she did know him well enough to tell him, time had passed and she had moved past Chokas’s inappropriate behavior towards her.

Student 7 indicated that the issues surrounding Chokas had caused her tension. She stated that she had lost a male friend in the aftermath of coming forward to the *New London Day*. The friend was also a graduate of Stonington High School and a supporter of Chokas’s. She stated that she felt betrayed and not believed by her former friend.

Student 8

Student 8 is a female 2011 graduate who took a class with Chokas.

Student 8 still lives in the Rhode Island/Connecticut area. Student 8 stated that, as soon as she heard about the allegations in the *New London Day*, she assumed they were about Chokas. Student 8 stated that, while she was in attendance at Stonington High School, denim skirts were in style. Student 8 indicated that, on one occasion when she wore a short denim skirt to Chokas’s class, he placed his hand on her thigh. Student 8 also stated that, on other occasions, Chokas touched her back, her lower back, and her shoulders. Student 8 described Chokas as “creepy, yet attractive,” “the cool teacher.” Student 8 stated that Chokas encouraged students to confide in him, and made her feel “listened to” when she did so.

Student 8 said she felt guilty once she heard the allegations from others about Chokas, and how upsetting those students found Chokas's behavior, but stated that, at the time, his conduct did not strike her as wrong. She stated that it never crossed her mind to report Chokas's behavior towards her at the time. However, she also indicated that, had she decided to report Chokas, she would not have had any clear idea of how to do so at that time.

Student 9

Student 9 is a 2020 graduate who took a class with Chokas. Student 9 took Choka's photojournalism class in the fall semester of her freshman year. Student 9 reported that Chokas touched her hair, her back, and her legs, and massaged her shoulders on numerous occasions. Student 9 also indicated that Chokas made comments about her appearance, and in particular, how "mature" she looked for a freshman. On one occasion, he commented about three female students in low cut dresses: "Why is no one taking a picture of these three beautiful women?"

Student 9 indicated that she did not report Chokas's touching her, or his comments about her appearance, during her freshman year, not even to her parents. However, Student 9 stated that, had she wished to report Chokas at the time, she would not have known what process to follow, or to whom she should report his behaviors.

Student 9 also indicated that, in light of all that had "come out" about Chokas's inappropriate behavior towards female students, she felt it was important to come forward, to support other students who had, she stated, "been victimized." In retrospect, Student 9 believes she should have reported Chokas to the Administration at the time.

Student 10

Student 10 is a female 2014 graduate who took a class with Chokas. Student 10 took Chokas's photojournalism course in the spring semester of her junior year. Student 10 recalls the class as "easy going"; she had heard it was an easy class. Student 10 stated that Chokas put his hand on her thigh. Student 10 stated that Chokas's touching her thigh made her uncomfortable. This was the only incident in which Student 10 recalls Chokas touching her. Student 10 stated that she saw Chokas touch the thighs and touch and massage the backs of the other female students enrolled in the class with her. Student 10 stated that she and several other students discussed it, and agreed that it was "weird".

Student 10 did not report Chokas touching her or the other students in her class. Had she decided to report it, she stated that she likely would have gone to the principal, and would have felt comfortable doing so. At the time, Student 10 did not take the matter too seriously, as Chokas had only touched her once. However, after enrolling in college and receiving a detailed presentation about Title IX as part of her orientation there, she thought that a presentation of that nature might have helped her and the other students to understand more fully that Chokas's behavior towards them was inappropriate.

Student 11

Student 11 is a female 2016 graduate who was a member of the girls' soccer team during the fall of the 2012-2013 school year.

Student 11 stated that, during a practice, Chokas hit her on the buttocks with his cane, and pinched her face on the cheeks, on a number of occasions. Student 11 also indicated that Chokas massaged her shoulders and thighs. Student 11 also indicated that, on several occasions,

Chokas invited her and some other female students to his room to eat paninis that he had made for them for lunch. Student 11 indicated that, when she would sit to eat, Chokas would put his legs on top of her legs. Student 11 stated that none of these actions seemed wrong to her at the time, although, in retrospect, she now understands that his conduct was inappropriate.

Student 11 stated that she saw Chokas pick up members of the soccer team and throw them over his shoulder, although Chokas did not do this to her. Student 11 did not know whether any soccer players whom Chokas treated this way had reported it.

Student 11 indicated that she had read the coverage of the Chokas matter in the *New London Day*, and on the Stonington Community Forum. She also stated that she believed that students had come forward in 2017 and that the Administration took no action. Student 11 could not provide me with any names or other information to corroborate this statement. However, Student 11 stated that she believed the reports of former students in the *New London Day* and on the Stonington Community Forum.

Student 11 indicated that, had she decided to report Chokas's conduct towards her and/or towards others on the soccer team, she would not have known whom to speak with or what process to follow. Student 11 also indicated that, when she enrolled in college, she received a two-hour presentation on Title IX. Student 11 indicated that such a presentation might have assisted her and other students whom Chokas touched to understand the seriousness of Chokas's actions, and to know what procedures they needed to follow to report him.

Student 12

Student 12 is a female 2008 graduate who took several classes with Chokas.

One of the classes that Student 12 took with Chokas was co-taught by another teacher. Student 12 indicated that she had no problem with Chokas during this course, and did not see him touching other students during it either.

Student 12 indicated that Chokas did touch her inappropriately during the class she took from him during her senior year. On one occasion, Chokas came up behind Student 12 when she was seated and bent over a computer screen and began massaging her shoulders and saying, “Relax.” Student 12 stated that she saw Chokas massaging other female students’ shoulders too. On another occasion, Student 12 stated that she was working with a partner and was facing a wall, without peripheral vision, when Chokas came up behind her and massaged her shoulders. Student 12 said she scrunched her shoulders up high to get his hands off of her. Student 12 stated that the fact that she could not see Chokas before he began massaging her made her particularly uncomfortable. Student 12 indicated that she saw Chokas touch another female student’s leg. On yet another occasion, Student 12 stated, Chokas commented on the short length of another student’s skirt.

Student 12 indicated that she never reported Chokas’s inappropriate touching and behavior with her or other students to anyone, and never considered doing so. Student 12 also stated that she would not have known to whom she should report the incident had she decided to do so.

Student 12 stated that she was not surprised that Chokas got “fired;”²⁵ she indicated that she had a younger sister that attended Stonington High School, and, while the sister never took

²⁵ Chokas was not fired; he resigned, effective June 30, 2019, and utilized accrued sick leave to remain employed from the date Mr. Friese directed that he be removed from Stonington High School until the effective date of Chokas’s resignation.

any classes with Chokas, she reported to Student 12 that Chokas continued to touch girls in class and make inappropriate comments.

Other Adult Interviews

Parent 1 (Parent of Student 7)

Parent 1 indicated that, as Student 7 had stated in her interview, Student 7 told Parent 1 about Chokas's inappropriate behavior towards herself and other students during the 2013-2014 school year, but close to the end of the year. Parent 1 indicated that Student 7 had mentioned the shoulder rubbing earlier in the year, but had played down its significance. Parent 1 indicated that Student 7 had told Parent 1 about the incident in the dark room, and that she had urged Student 7 to bring the matter to the school's attention. Parent 1 also corroborated that Student 7 was only 14 when these incidents occurred, and was very reticent about discussing them.

Parent 1 also indicated that Student 7 informed her that she had attempted to tell someone about Chokas, but did not. Parent 1 expressed regret that she did not push Student 7 harder to report Chokas to the Administration at the time.

Parent 1 indicated that she encouraged Student 7 to speak to the investigator. She believes that it is important for the students to be heard.

John Glenn

John Glenn is a member of the community who identified himself as a close friend of Chokas's. Mr. Glenn is the father of both a 2018 graduate of Stonington High School, and a current student. Mr. Glenn indicated that Chokas was a good role model for Mr. Glenn's two sons, and communicated to them a high level of expectations.

Mr. Glenn indicated that Chokas had coached one of Mr. Glenn's sons in soccer, and that one of Chokas's watchwords as a coach was "unacceptable." Mr. Glenn stated that he never witnessed any inappropriate behavior by Chokas in any setting.

Candace Anderson, Member, Stonington Board of Education

Candace Anderson was a member of the Stonington Board of Education at the time of her interview. She has since resigned from the Board.

Ms. Anderson related a conversation amongst her daughter, a sophomore at Stonington High School at the time, and three of her friends, as Ms. Anderson drove them home from a café in 2016. They began by talking about school, then one stated: "Don't take Chokas," or something to that effect. All of the girls related stories that they had heard about Chokas touching girls, and making inappropriate comments. Ms. Anderson indicated that she told the girls that all of the actions they were describing were unacceptable. She also stated that she urged them to report their concerns to the administrators at the high school.

Ms. Anderson also indicated that she shared the information from the conversation in the car with the Administration, including Dr. Riley. However, she also acknowledged that she was unable to provide any specific information in terms of dates, times or individual students involved, and that, therefore, there was nothing that could have informed a further investigation.

Parent 2 – Parent of Student 6

Parent 2 is the parent of two recent graduates and one current student at Stonington High School.

Parent 2 stated that she believed that the students who are coming forward now feel concerned about what they should have done in the past. She also stated that she believes that clear guidance to the student body at the high school about Title IX procedures will prevent future situations like those involving Chokas.

Parent 3

Parent 3 is the parent of a 2017 graduate of Stonington High School. She contacted the investigator by phone early in the investigation. Parent 3 wished to remain anonymous.

Parent 3 expressed concern that not many students had contacted the investigator at the time of her interview. Subsequently, students did come forward to speak to the investigator, as discussed above.

David Thomas

David Thomas is a parent of several graduates of and one student currently enrolled in Stonington High School.

Mr. Thomas indicated that his daughters and their friends had complained to him about Chokas as a soccer coach, stating that he was a “creepy guy.”

Mr. Thomas stated that he met with Dr. Riley in 2013 to lodge a number of complaints about the girls’ soccer team. Mr. Thomas also indicated that he had a face-to-face meeting with Dr. Riley in which he informed Dr. Riley that he was a mandated reporter. Mr. Thomas stated that he had informed Dr. Riley about an incident between Chokas and a student in the dark room on February 21, 2013, and that Mr. Thomas had documentation of this. While Mr. Thomas had documentation of several meetings between himself and Dr. Riley, which Dr. Riley does not

contest, Mr. Thomas did not provide the investigator with any documentation that he identified specific, named students with Dr. Riley. Without such specific information, there was no concrete allegation to investigate and no basis for the Administration to take any action against Chokas based upon the information Mr. Thomas provided.

III. The Questions Established by the Stonington Board of Education for the Investigator

A. What Happened?

1. Chokas Engaged in Inappropriate Behavior with Students

For a number of reasons discussed more fully below, the investigator believes that Chokas did engage in a number of inappropriate behaviors with female students at Stonington High School over a long period of time.

First, the descriptions of Chokas's conduct, from students and graduates from 2005 to 2020, are quite consistent. All of the students who spoke with the investigator about Chokas touching them and other students complained of back and shoulder massages by Chokas. At least three of the students described Chokas leaning over them while they were seated and placing his knee on their thighs. None of the students described more serious misconduct, such as touching breasts, sex organs, or attempted assault. In the investigator's experience, when multiple alleged victims are lying or exaggerating, their descriptions of what the alleged perpetrator did to them are inconsistent, with some alleged victims claiming more serious misconduct than others. The fact that each of the alleged victims' stories were similar in all important details, although the misconduct they described occurred over a 15-year period, makes

it extremely unlikely that any, let alone all of them, were fabricating their descriptions of Chokas's behavior.

In addition, none of the students who spoke with the investigator indicated that they were in contact with each other prior to speaking to the investigator. For this reason, it is highly unlikely that the students worked to "synchronize" their stories. While it is possible, even likely, that one or more of the students reviewed the accusations that appeared in the *New London Day* or on the Stonington Community Forum, the fact that none of them endorsed any of the more lurid allegations advanced there is further evidence that the accounts they shared with the investigator are true.

Second, while the coronavirus required that the interviews be conducted remotely, the investigator conducted all but one of the student interviews face to face, on Zoom. All of the students who spoke with the investigator about Chokas's inappropriate touching seemed credible. All of the students seemed honestly concerned about what had happened to them and others. All expressed as a reason for coming forward a desire to make sure that what they experienced should not happen again. While some expressed disappointment in the district's response to the matter, none expressed vindictiveness towards the district or any staff member, or stated a desire that further consequences be meted out to anyone.

Third, while some may question why the students came forward now, in some cases a decade or more after the events they complained of occurred, their reasons for not coming forward at the time of the incidents were consistent. Many expressed that they did not fully comprehend the seriousness of Chokas's misconduct at the time, but became sensitized to it later. Some indicated that the rise of the "Me, Too" movement enabled them to see that what Chokas

had done to them was wrong. Many indicated that, given the rumors among students about Chokas's touching of students, they believed that the school Administration must have known about it, and condoned it.

Fourth, the fact that two students who spoke to the investigator praised Chokas and stated that he did not engage in inappropriate touching while they were in his class in no way undermines the statements of the other 10 students. None of the students who described Chokas's inappropriate touching stated that he engaged in this conduct with every student. Two of those students indicated that Chokas targeted only certain students for attention and touching. Also, when asked by the investigator whether they believed that other students were lying, neither of Chokas's supporters said so. Indeed, Student 3 indicated that Chokas had touched her shoulder and back, just as many of the students who complained to the investigator did. Student 2, who had Chokas for study hall only and stated that he never touched her, confirmed that he would occasionally touch students on the shoulder. Student 6 indicated that Chokas told her he was not allowed to be alone with any female students. The timing of Chokas's statement as reported by Student 6 is consistent with his having received the letter of concern from Mr. Friese in 2017.

In short, there is no reason not to believe the consistent accounts by 10 students of Chokas touching them inappropriately, often in class.

2. There is No Evidence that the Administration Knew of Chokas's Misconduct Prior to 2017.

While there has been a great deal of commentary alleging that the Administration Stonington High School, and even the central Administration of the Stonington Public Schools, knew of Chokas's misconduct and either took no action, or, worse, discouraged reporting of his misconduct or engaged in a cover up, the investigator found no evidence to support these allegations.

First, and foremost, only one of the students who spoke with the investigator about Chokas's inappropriate touching of them indicated that she had complained to any adult employed by the Stonington Public Schools at the time the incidents occurred – Student 4. Student 4's complaint resulted in Chokas being walked out of Stonington High School on the day it occurred. All of the other students who told the investigator of inappropriate touching by Chokas indicated that they did *not* report it to any Stonington staff member at the time.²⁶ Given the publicity that has surrounded the Chokas matter for the past year and several months, and the number of individuals who came forward to be interviewed by the investigator, it is not plausible that one or more student victims of Chokas's misconduct shared their accounts with the school Administration at the time yet chose not to disclose this fact to the investigator.²⁷

In addition, all of the administrators who spoke with the investigator indicated that the first actionable evidence that any of them received about Chokas's inappropriate behavior came

²⁶ While Student 7 indicated that she believed she "might have" told a secretary in Guidance or the High School Administration's offices that she needed to speak to someone about Chokas, there was no record of such a report.

²⁷ While Mr. Thomas indicated that he had made Dr. Riley aware of misconduct by Chokas in 2013, he did not provide Dr. Riley with the identity of any student in question. Under these circumstances, Dr. Riley did not believe there was anything concrete to investigate at this time.

in 2017. That incident resulted in the letter of concern placed in Mr. Friese's building file. While it is reasonable to question whether this response to the 2017 incident was sufficient, it is by no means evidence of a cover-up.

Further, one of the students who spoke to the investigator concerning Chokas's inappropriate conduct towards her, Student 5, graduated from Stonington High School in 2006, before any of the current members of the Administration held leadership roles in the district. A student who spoke on Chokas's behalf, Student 2, graduated from Stonington High School in 2005. While Student 2 stated that Chokas never touched her, she did acknowledge seeing him touch other female students on the shoulder. The fact that Chokas's conduct predates the tenure of any of the administrators accused of covering for Chokas militates against any claim of a cover-up, particularly since there is no evidence in personnel file of discipline for misconduct in the years prior to the employment of the current administrative team.

Finally, the Administration's reaction to Student 4's complaint about Chokas belies any claim that the Administration did not take such allegations seriously. Once a classmate of Student 4 informed Ms. Crowley of Chokas's inappropriate conduct towards her, Ms. Crowley immediately interviewed Student 4, pulling her out of lunch. Once Ms. Crowley heard Student 4's account of Chokas's inappropriate touching, Ms. Crowley informed Mr. Friese and Mr. Curland. Mr. Friese had Chokas removed from the building that day.

One of the criticisms of the Administration's handling of the Chokas matter concerns the decision to allow Chokas to resign and receive payment pursuant to his accumulated sick leave through the end of the 2018-2019 school year. Specifically, some have stated that Dr. Riley should have pursued termination proceedings against Chokas under the provisions of Conn. Gen.

Stat. Sec. 10-151, the sole avenue for termination of a tenured teacher.²⁸ Dr. Riley indicated that he, Mr. Friese, and others discussed the potential for termination of Chokas with the district's general counsel, Nicholas Grello of Zangari, Cohn. Dr. Riley and Mr. Friese both indicated that Mr. Grello advised them that the evidence of Chokas's inappropriate touching of students in 2017 and 2019, without more, was not sufficient to sustain Chokas's termination under the Tenure Act. This investigator concurs in that assessment, given that: 1) there was no documentation in Chokas's personnel file of any incident prior to the 2017 incident; 2) the Administration did not have the information concerning a pattern of misconduct by Chokas at the time the Administration made the decision regarding termination, as the allegations about Chokas's prior misconduct did not become public until the conclusion of the 2018-2019 school year; and 3) the 2017 letter of concern was not sufficient to put him on notice that any additional incident would result in termination.

In sum, the investigator found no evidence to support allegations that any member of the Administration engaged in a cover-up of Chokas's misconduct, or had actionable knowledge of it prior to 2017.

3. The 2017 incident called for more stringent action than the letter of concern.

While Mr. Friese clearly believed the allegations brought to his attention in 2017 about Chokas's misconduct towards a student who was also a player on the girls' golf team and took them seriously, he did not view these allegations as implicating Title IX, sexual harassment or acts of child abuse and neglect to be reported to the Department of Children and Families. ("DCF") Rather, he deemed Chokas's misconduct inappropriate, issued a letter to Chokas

²⁸ Chokas attained tenure by operation of law upon completion of his fourth year of teaching and his return for a fifth year, long before the Administration learned of his misconduct.

informing him of that determination, and warning him to avoid such conduct in the future. He did not refer Chokas for training regarding Title IX or sexual harassment. Given the nature of the allegations, the Administration should have treated the matter as a complaint of sexual harassment and as a potential Title IX violation.

The student who made the complaint in 2017 described the following: Chokas had touched her leg with a golf club during a stretching exercise during a golf practice; he had given her back massages in class; he had placed his knee on her leg while apparently assisting her in class; and he had asked her questions about her relationship with her boyfriend. The student also indicated that Chokas's actions had made her uncomfortable, and that she wanted his actions to stop. Taken together, the allegations amount to a plausible claim of a hostile learning environment, as the student indicated that Chokas's actions had made her uncomfortable in class, thereby "limiting" her access to her educational program. It would have been appropriate to treat the matter as a claim of both sexual harassment of a student by a teacher, and creation of a hostile learning environment under Title IX. The high school Administration should have brought the matter to the attention of the Title IX Coordinator, Ms. Van Etten, for her analysis and investigation.

In addition, no consideration was given to removing Chokas as the coach of a girls' team. Yet, Mr. Friese had indicated that Chokas should not be alone with female students, and the incident in 2017 involved Chokas actually touching a female student on several occasions. Chokas himself apparently acknowledged his understanding of Mr. Friese's directive about not being alone with female students in his conversation with Student 6. Given the fact that Chokas was working alone with the girls' golf team, without regular supervision, Mr. Friese should have considered whether it was appropriate to leave Chokas in place as the girls' golf coach. While it

is possible that the Administration may have determined that the allegations in the 2017 complaint, standing alone, did not constitute just cause for removing Chokas from his position as girls' golf coach, the fact that this action was not even considered indicates that the Administration did not view Chokas's actions in 2017 through the lenses of Title IX and sexual harassment. If the high school Administration had considered the matter in that light, they might well have decided to remove Chokas from his position as golf coach.

B. Were the policies in place correct and followed?

The Stonington Board of Education did have an appropriate policy under Title IX/Sexual Harassment in place during 2017 and 2019, when the two incidents of Chokas's misconduct that were brought to the Administration's attention took place. However, as discussed above, in connection with the 2017 incident, the Administration did not view Chokas' conduct towards the student through the lenses of sexual harassment and Title IX, and did not refer the matter to Ms. Van Etten. This was in error.

Mr. Friese did treat the 2019 incident as both a potential Title IX violation and a potential claim of sexual harassment. This indicates that he had come to understand the seriousness of the allegations against Chokas, and the need to view them through the appropriate lenses.

In addition, Mr. Friese acknowledged that the high school student handbook did not contain the board's Title IX/Sexual Harassment policy until the 2019-2020 school year, after the 2019 incident with Chokas that led to his departure. The Administration included the policy in the handbook for the 2019-2020 school year. For this reason, the only place the students who spoke to the investigator could have accessed the policy prior to that time - including the identity of the district's Title IX coordinator - was on the Board's website. This may explain the

apparent lack of knowledge of the students subjected to Chokas's inappropriate conduct as to what procedures they could have followed to report Chokas.

Finally, as the Administration and the Board are likely aware, in May of this year, the United States Department of Education announced a significant change to the definition of sexual harassment under the federal regulations. While a number of state attorneys general attempted to block this regulatory change in the courts via an injunction until the matter could be fully litigated, these attempts were unsuccessful, and, as of now, the new definition is in effect. Interestingly, as many states are moving towards a broader view of sexual harassment in the schools, the United States Department of Education has narrowed the definition of sexual harassment.

In 2001, the Office of Civil Rights, the agency within the United States Department of Education that enforces the statutes and regulations regarding discrimination in public schools, released a two-part definition of sexual harassment in schools: (1) harassment where a teacher or employee conditions a benefit or educational decision on a student's submission to unwelcome sexual conduct (i.e., *quid pro quo* harassment); or (2) hostile environment harassment, in which the conduct of students, teachers, or third parties limits or denies a student's ability to benefit from or participate in an academic program because of sex. The definition set forth by the United States Department of Education in May of 2020 provides the following three-part definition as follows: (1) *Quid pro quo* sexual harassment, meaning that an employee or contractor of the Board conditions the provision of an aid, benefit, or service of the educational program or school activity on an individual's participation in unwelcome sexual conduct; (2) Hostile educational environment, meaning unwelcome conduct determined by a reasonable person to be so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it effectively denies a person

equal access to the Board’s educational programs or activities; or (3) Any instance of sexual assault, as defined in 20 U.S.C. 1092(f)(6)(A)(v), dating violence, as defined in 34 U.S.C. 12291(a)(10), domestic violence, as defined in 34 U.S.C. 12291(a)(8), and stalking, as defined in 34 U.S.C. 12291(a)(30). Thus, while under the 2001 approach, hostile environment harassment required only a showing that the environment “limits or denies a student’s ability to benefit from or participate in an academic program because of the sex,” the new definition requires that the hostile educational environment be such that “a reasonable person” would find the “unwelcome conduct (i.e. the harassment) to be so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it effectively denies a person equal access to the Board’s educational programs or activities.” The new standard, which is also accompanied by strict requirements concerning the investigation of Title IX complaints, will require additional training of staff, and dissemination of information to students, to make certain that all members of the Stonington Public Schools community understand their rights and responsibilities under Title IX going forward.

C. Where and in what way did the communication breakdown occur, and why?

Based upon the fact that many of the students who spoke with the investigator indicated that, while they did not report Chokas’s misconduct at the time it occurred, had they wished to report it, they would not have known to whom they should report it, or what procedures were available to them, the policy regarding Title IX/Sexual Harassment was not communicated clearly and sufficiently to the student body of Stonington High School over the time period in question.

A number of students indicated that they attended an assembly each year regarding sexual harassment and Title IX. However, all of the students who described the assembly stated that the focus was on student-on-student harassment. In particular, several students described a

presentation by Officer Page concerning sexting, and warning students not to take or send nude or suggestive pictures to one another. Officer Page and Mr. Friese also acknowledged that sexting and suggestive photographs online were the primary focuses of presentations to the student body on Title IX and sexual harassment issues. No student who spoke to the investigator indicated that the annual presentation concerning sexual harassment included any discussion of a hostile learning environment, or the possibility that an adult staff member's conduct in school could constitute an appropriate basis for a complaint of sexual harassment, under the 2001 standard discussed above, which was in effect at the time of the 2017 and 2019 incidents.

For all of these reasons, the students who were subjected to Chokas's inappropriate touching and other misconduct did not know what steps they could take to report him and get their concerns addressed. A number of students expressed the belief that the Administration knew about Chokas's behavior and either condoned it or did not take it seriously. While the investigator found no evidence that the Administration had any actionable evidence to investigate Chokas until 2017, the fact that the students had such a belief is indicative of a failure to communicate fully to the students the seriousness of improper adult conduct on the basis of sex that made students uncomfortable in classroom settings or while participating on sports teams under applicable state and federal laws.

D. Did climate issues contribute to the Chokas matter?

As discussed above, before the 2019 complaint that led to Chokas's departure, there was insufficient emphasis on and publicity of the district's Title IX/Sexual harassment policies, particular as that policy concerned conduct of adult staff towards students. The applicable policy did not appear in the student handbook. There was no presentation to students about the

applicability of Title IX and sexual harassment to adult misconduct towards students. This lack of emphasis on adult misconduct towards students led to students not understanding the seriousness of Chokas's misconduct, or their right to be free of such treatment by any adult in school. This, in turn, had the effect of causing a number of students not to report Chokas's misconduct at the times it occurred.

The school staff has taken many actions to address both sexual harassment and Title IX issues with students since Chokas's departure in early 2019. For example, Allison Van Etten, the district's Title IX Coordinator, brought in an outside agency, Safe Futures, that provides support to victims of sexual harassment and even criminal sexual assault, to meet with groups of student leaders at the high school. Ms. Van Etten, who facilitated Safe Futures' work at Stonington High School, indicated that the student leaders advanced the following reasons that students did not come forward with complaints about Chokas: 1) they believed that the adults at the high school already knew about Chokas's behavior, and, since he continued to work there, assumed that the Administration condoned his conduct; 2) they were unsure of whom to approach with their concerns; and 3) they feared retaliation if they needed a passing grade in Chokas's class. As Ms. Van Etten stated in her interview, the fact that the students had these beliefs indicates that they did not have sufficient understanding of their rights to be free of behavior such as Chokas's.

Ms. Van Etten, on her own and, since July of 2020, with Ms. Dawe's assistance, has taken a number of steps to educate both students and staff about both Title IX and sexual harassment, based upon all of the information that has become available since Chokas's departure from Stonington High School in January of 2019. All administrators in the district have attended the Title IX training offered by the Connecticut State Department of Education. Ms. Van Etten and Ms. Dawe have developed training materials to educate all students about

their rights under Title IX, including their right to be free of a hostile learning environment. The board's Title IX/Sexual Harassment policy is now set forth in the Stonington High School Student Handbook. Ms. Van Etten believes that all staff, and especially the Administration at the high school, are much more sensitized to issues of staff-on-student harassment, as well as the issues surrounding hostile learning environment.

The investigator believes that the staff and Administration at both Stonington High School and the district Central Office now understand fully the district's obligations under both Title IX and the state and federal laws pertaining to sexual harassment. In addition, every administrator who spoke to the investigator is committed to supporting the work that Ms. Van Etten and now Ms. Dawe are engaged in to educate students about their rights under sexual harassment laws. Ms. Van Etten and Ms. Dawe also indicated that they understand fully the need to reinforce this information with students on at least an annual basis. Based on all of this information, the district is well prepared to move forward from this matter with an improved school climate and learning environment for all students.