

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **Joint Release: Liberty County Sheriff's Office & Liberty County Superintendent of Schools**

**DATE: February 26, 2018**

The recent school shootings in South Florida once again brought school safety to the forefront of our community consciousness. Unfortunately, instead of pulling together in a common cause to find ways to continue to improve our school security some have chosen to attack the Liberty County School Board and the Liberty County Sheriff's Office. These unfounded accusations are unfortunate because they don't tell the true story of existing safety measures nor ones planned prior to the recent school shootings which will enhance school safety.

Your School Board and Sheriff's Office have worked diligently to provide an onsite Deputy at each of our schools. Many Districts across the state DO NOT have a law enforcement presence at each school, especially at elementary and middle schools. These law enforcement personnel, often known as School Resource Deputies, also accompany our sports teams to home and away contests. Again, this heightened security measure is NOT provided in many districts across the state.

The events regarding the threat toward W.R. Tolar School on Wednesday, February 21<sup>st</sup> are as follows. During the final class of the day on Tuesday, February 20<sup>th</sup>, a twelve year old seventh grade student made a comment to a group of other middle school children that he would "shoot up the school tomorrow" meaning Wednesday, February 21<sup>st</sup>. The group of students who heard this statement did not report the threat to school staff that day, nor to their parents or guardians that evening. On the morning of Wednesday, February 21<sup>st</sup>, a school employee supervising students before the start of the school day overheard two students discussing the threat. That employee then contacted W.R. Tolar School administration and made them aware of the threat. The school administrator then immediately notified the Liberty County Sheriff's Office School Resource Deputy, who was on campus at the school. The School Resource Deputy then contacted other members of the Sheriff's Office who responded to the school to investigate and assist. In the meantime, school administrators and the School

Resource Deputy on campus identified, located, and detained the student who made the alleged threat. That student was secured and escorted to the school office for further investigation. The identification, location, and detaining of the student who allegedly made the threat all occurred within approximately three (3) minutes of school administration being made aware of the alleged threat. Within five (5) minutes of the School Resource Deputy being initially made aware of the alleged threat, six (6) additional members of the Sheriff's Office were on scene at the school, bringing the total number of law enforcement officers present at the school to seven (7). Two of the additional Deputies were assigned to conduct the investigation into the alleged threat, two were assigned as a search team to search all areas of the school the suspect had accessed, and two were assigned to monitor access gates to the school.

Once it was confirmed through investigation that the student who made the threats was detained, all additional law enforcement action was coordinated to cause as little concern and limit any effect on the students and staff at the school. To facilitate the search of over 300 unsecured lockers in the 300 (middle school) building of the school and the courtyard area, teachers in the 300 building were instructed to hold their students in their classrooms as a "soft lockdown." Again, during this time, the student who had allegedly made the threats toward the school had already been detained, and the search team was working to ensure no weapons were present on the campus. The search of these areas as well as any area the suspect accessed took just over two (2) hours to complete. Once the search was completed, students were allowed to change classes and proceed through the day as normal.

While the search was ongoing, Liberty County Sheriff's Office Investigators worked to identify and interview students who had information regarding the threat. Ultimately, five students were interviewed who stated they had heard the threat from the suspect. In each case, investigators contacted the parent or guardian of the witness, and obtained consent to interview the student. Ultimately, investigators interviewed the suspect who admitted to making the threatening statement. This interview process took several hours to complete. Ultimately, at approximately 1:00 PM, the suspect was placed under arrest and transported by a deputy to the County Jail.

In consultation with the State Attorney's Office, it was determined the suspect be charged with Disruption of a School Function in violation of Florida Statute 877.13. This is a misdemeanor offense. However, this is an ongoing investigation involving the Liberty County Sheriff's Office, Florida Department of Law Enforcement, and State Attorney's Office. Additional information is continuing to be collected, and if sufficient evidence is found, this charge may be upgraded by the State Attorney's Office. Due to the fact that the perpetrator of this threat had been identified, arrested and removed from the school, additional law enforcement presence in the following days was not deemed necessary.

Although the events of February 14<sup>th</sup> in Broward County have been a wake up call to many, the Liberty County Sheriff's Office and Liberty County School Board have been serious about the safety of students and staff long before then. So far this school year, the Liberty County Sheriff's Office has investigated three other threats against our schools (not including the February 21<sup>st</sup> incident), which have resulted in three arrests. This level of attention is not something that started in response to the recent tragedy but is part of our diligent commitment to ensuring the safety of our students and staff. No threat, or alleged threat, against any of our schools will be taken lightly by the Sheriff's Office or School Board.

As we move forward, to strengthen school security our District will establish a safety committee to address needs and concerns at regular scheduled meetings. District Staff, Liberty County Sheriff's Office representatives and community representatives will make up this committee. Access points at each school and facility security upgrades are being addressed currently. As construction nears on the new Liberty County High School we will insure that school safety measures and planning are incorporated in construction.

Sheriff Eddie Joe White and Superintendent David Summers urge you to contact them with your concerns and questions. You can contact the Sheriff's Office at 850-643-2235, or the Superintendent of Schools Office at 850-643-2275.

As parents, students, citizens and your elected officials, we are ALL in this effort to ensure the safety of our students and staff. There will always be ways to improve on what we are doing. Let's work together to make our schools the best they can be in every area especially school safety.

David H. Summers,

Liberty County School Superintendent

Eddie Joe White,

Liberty County Sheriff