

FANNIN COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION

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SUPERINTENDENT
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April 12, 2018

Dear FCSS Community:

Our Board of Education met this evening, and there was one item on the agenda that related to the adoption of a policy that pertains to weapons. I wish to share information about this agenda item to keep you informed, and I want you to have the facts in case you hear misinformation.

There is no higher purpose of our school system than to provide a safe and secure environment for our students, faculty, and staff. Your Board and I are unable to ignore the many tragic events across our nation that have resulted in the deaths of so many, including students and staff, as a result of horrific violent acts committed by those wishing to do harm.

Through collaboration with public safety officials and others, our nation's schools have done a good job over the years with plans of action to respond to emergencies on campuses. These efforts are commendable and will be ongoing as the threats to safety, as well as the best practices in response to them, evolve. These plans apply to a broad range of situations, and some involve equipment that has been at our disposal in schools for many years. For example, should there be a fire at school, we practice evacuation drills and have strategically placed extinguishers throughout the building; these may be used to stop the fire before firefighters arrive. In recent years, schools across the state have acquired automated external defibrillators (AEDs), as well as bleed response kits, and these have saved lives when quickly implemented by trained school personnel before the emergency medical services can arrive.

Along these same lines, resources officers (SROs) have been placed in schools. During the course of my career, I have seen the number of SROs progress from none in our district to one; then the number has grown over the years to our current ratio of one SRO for each school. As I learn more about other schools, I realize this ratio is not the case in so many districts, and I am thankful for the collaboration with our local governments and the Fannin County School System that gives us this ratio.

The SROs do a fine job serving as members of the school community and as officers of the law. As their job title states, they are a resource to the school, especially with safety matters. They are sworn officers who serve and protect, and they are certainly a comfort to have on campus and are an effective crime deterrent; however, they cannot be in every location at all times. Furthermore, if they are – for any of a myriad of reasons – unavailable to respond to a threat, such as an active shooter in a school, there are no other immediate options available at school to respond to the issue in a direct and equal manner. The 911 system should be called, and help may arrive in just a few minutes, but that is a long time to wait during a situation when every second counts.

Georgia law (O.C.G.A. § 16-11-127.1) strictly controls the possession of any weapon on and around school property. This is a comprehensive law with strict consequences, and it is intended to make

schools safer. History has shown, though, that those who intend to use a weapon to cause harm at school do not have regard for this or any other law.

A state law (O.C.G.A. § 16-11-130.1) was passed a few years ago that grants local boards of education the authority to enact a policy allowing certain personnel – beyond those who may already be authorized by state law, such as an SRO – to be armed on a voluntary basis. The purpose of Fannin County Board of Education Policy GAMB is to create a controlled and legal means by which certain school personnel may – in a legitimate process that is to be carried out in conjunction with my office, our Board, and the Sheriff of Fannin County – become eligible to have access to a weapon.

As a professional educator, I will be the first to say that simply increasing the number of weapons already legally on our campuses (through the provisions of O.C.G.A. § 16-11-127.1) is not, at least in of itself, the answer. We must admit that the objects that may be weapons are generally not the issue; the issue is when any object – whether a gun, a knife, or anything else – is misused by a person who intends to do harm. The importance of consideration for initiatives that pertain to mental health interventions, as well as the notion of a “See something, say something” community mindset, are critical components to heading off ill-minded intentions before they become deadly human actions.

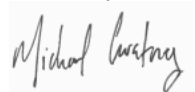
Emergencies do occur, though, and just like a defibrillator, a tourniquet, or a fire extinguisher, a firearm is – at its core – a tool. The spirit of Board Policy GAMB is to create an opportunity for certain trained volunteer personnel to utilize that tool to stop – or at least minimize – the damage being done by one who has complete disregard for human life, as well as society’s laws, and is inappropriately using a weapon to harm or kill others.

This policy is to be implemented only by a select volunteer group as a deterrent and to the benefit of the entire school community. If you are uncomfortable with what this entails, you do not have to give it another thought; however, you would be remiss not to be thankful for those who do concern themselves with the security of others. Just as members of our United States Armed Forces, as well as those who serve in public safety, are willing to put themselves in harm’s way to protect you, me, and my child, there are school personnel willing to make the same commitment during those precious first seconds of a crisis on one of our campuses.

Safety is the top priority. We do not wait for emergency professionals but instead take immediate action during fires, injuries, and heart attacks; likewise, we should never have to wait for outside help to begin a swift and appropriate response to an attack on our school community. In the words John F. Kennedy, “There are risks and costs to action. But they are far less than the long-range risks of comfortable inaction.”

Be sure to contact me if you have questions. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,



Michael Gwatney, Ed.D.
Superintendent