

School Safety

Over the last several weeks, we have experienced a number of students who have made a wide range of threats and negative comments on social media. Most of these comments have been minimum and have not been identified as actual threats; however, others have been more serious and have elevated our level of concern. Regardless of the degree of threat, we investigate each incident thoroughly and take every comment seriously. We want to share some relevant information with parents, students, and community members about this issue in hopes of preventing future problems.

First, it is extremely important that parents, students, and community members notify school officials if they see disturbing or threatening comments on any type of social media. This would also include any type of written notes or messages left in a public place. Often, individuals in the community are aware of these comments before school officials because we are not consistently monitoring social media. It is important that, if you see something, say something.

Second, we strongly encourage every parent and guardian to take a few minutes this week and talk with their children about the consequences associated with making threats of any nature. We currently live in an environment that is extremely sensitive to threats, and we will address each situation brought to our attention. Parents need to clearly communicate with children that they exercise control and good judgment when using social media. A brief lack of judgment when sending a post can result in suspensions, expulsions, or incarceration. Students need to understand that outward expression of violent thoughts and actions are not acceptable through social media. We currently have some Hamblen County students who are incarcerated because they failed to use good judgment, so please talk with your children to prevent future problems. In addition, we will ask our building level administrators to share similar information with students.

Third, we have excellent administrators, educators, and counselors who are willing to help students who are experiencing periods of frustration, anger, or anxiety. Please encourage your children to talk with a school official, a parent, a church member, or some other adult instead of venting their frustrations on social media. We can help students navigate through these issues if we are aware of their problems.

Fourth, we will always attempt to communicate with parents on these issues, but we hope that everyone understands that these situations are often complicated. In many situations, the investigation is still in process and we can't release all the information we have. In virtually every case, the child is a minor and we are limited on what information we can release. In addition, we often can't keep ahead of social media posts because we are actually involved in collecting accurate information. We don't want to send out an official message until we know the facts. Unfortunately, many on social media are not bound by this same standard. They often post or repost inaccurate information, which further complicates our actions. We will disseminate a message as soon as we know the facts. Of course, we would close schools, or close specific schools, if we thought there was an immediate or serious threat. We do understand that many parents want immediate access to all factual information; but we are unable, and often it would be counter-productive, to release a significant amount of information involving this type of disciplinary issue until we are confident of what has happened.

Fifth, although there have been horrific events recently involving violent acts at school, it is important to understand that schools are one of the safest places to be. Millions of students come to school on a daily basis, and seldom do we have an incident. We have actually incorporated multiple measures into the schools to protect students and staff. We don't share that information because it would compromise safety if those wishing to do harm had knowledge of our procedures. Of course, there is no way that we can guarantee a tragedy will not occur at school. Individuals with malice can do harm at athletic events, at church, at shopping malls, etc. It is virtually impossible to prevent all potential threats; however, we can consistently be vigilant and focus on safety.

Sixth, we fully understand that parents want to have immediate information and contact with school officials when something happens. I can appreciate this and I fully understand because I have a granddaughter in kindergarten. Often, we will have a number of calls to the school from parents wanting information while we are dealing with a potential crisis. Although we understand the reason for these calls, our phones and resources are often so consumed by responding that our attention and energy are diverted from addressing critical issues. We will send out a school message as soon as we can, and we are committed to taking the appropriate actions to keep our students and staff safe. We ask parents to help us accomplish this task by limiting the calls to schools when we are dealing with an issue. We would also ask parents to be concise with comments when calling, so we can dedicate our attention to ensuring that students are safe.

Seventh, it is important that we personally model good behavior and appropriate use of social media. The school system is constantly dealing with issues in which parents and families have engaged in negative or violent social media exchanges after school hours, which migrate into the school the next day. Often, our children see these posts and they learn from our examples. Children will see these derogatory posts and may believe this is acceptable. We need to set good examples for our children. If we fail to model what we are teaching, we are probably teaching something else with our life.

Eighth, we work very closely with law enforcement. Both Chief Overholt and Sheriff Jarnagin have been excellent to work with and have been extremely supportive of the schools. They have proven to be very professional, highly skilled, and quick to respond to our needs. Law enforcement officials in Hamblen County legitimately care about the safety of our staff and students, and we are fortunate to have such a strong working relationship with them. They work jointly with the school administration to quickly identify students making threats, and charges will be filed.

It is frustrating and sad that we live in a time where conversations of this nature must be held. Throughout this process, the vast majority of our energy will always be focused on ensuring that all potential threats are identified quickly, the threat is isolated, the victims are protected, and all staff and students are safe. It is also important for all to understand the seriousness of making a threat against a school, staff, or students. We realize that parents entrust us with the safety of their children, and we take that responsibility extremely seriously. Thanks for your attention to this article. Remember: School Matters!

--Jeff Perry, Superintendent
Hamblen County Schools