

Springfield Public Schools

P.O. Box 210
Springfield, New Jersey 07081

Michael A. Davino
Superintendent of Schools

973-376-1025 x 1213
FAX 973-376-5539
Email: mdavino@springfieldschools.com

I want us all to take a breath and recognize who we are and what we do every day. What the parents in our community do every day is trust us with the most precious things in their lives -- their children. And what we do every day is take all of our training and many years of experience and care for these children -- as if they were our own -- while educating them and making sure they are safe.

We have come to a sobering awareness as a society as to how dangerous bullying can be and, because of that, we never take it lightly. With that history of caring for your children, it is particularly disappointing to me that the members of this community would take half-truths spun by people with an agenda and people in the media and believe them as if they were the complete truth. And so I want to take an opportunity to share some truths of which you deserve to be made aware.

The first truth has to be my acknowledgement as to the professionalism of our staff in the face of what I know to be some adult bullying. Right now and for the last several weeks, the most vicious bullying of which I am aware has been directed at our principal and our teachers and our secretaries, by the people in this community and some from outside this community. These folks, who have been using their training and experience to care for your children, have received unkind emails and vulgar voicemails, which have no place in this community or our society. These vicious and vulgar messages have been directed at our employees based on what was spun by the media with incomplete and inaccurate accounts of what has gone on in our schools. I find them regrettable and I hope we can put a stop to them right now.

Ordinarily, we do not make public statements about student-related issues such as bullying investigations or requests for accommodations. However, in this case, the parent of one student has used the media to attempt to extort from District staff that which the parent was denied for educational reasons. The parent has engaged the media and has publicized her child's otherwise private information. Therefore, we will address the

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inaccurate information, spun by the media in an effort to enflame this situation and put pressure on the District, in order to focus on the truth.

Here are the facts:

1. No claim of harassment or bullying was made by this parent or any parent in that classroom at any point during the 2016-2017 school year.

2. At the end of the 2016-2017 school year, the professionals in our District reviewed the achievement of the students in various classes and determined that it was in the best educational interests of the students in that classroom to remain with the same teacher for the 2017-2018 school year. The students had made good to excellent progress.

3. The practice of having students remain with the same classroom teacher for two years, or more, in a row, is called "looping." While the District does not have a policy with regard to looping, it is the opinion of the professionals in the District that, when possible and appropriate, it is a well-supported educational approach that may be used. There are many benefits to this practice and these benefits are all documented in respected educational literature. Because of our belief in the educational benefits of this practice, the District has over eight classes this year where the teacher followed the students from one year to the next.

4. The parent at issue in the recent media reports initially objected to her child being placed with the same teacher because she stated she did not like that particular teacher. She made no mention to administration whatsoever of bullying or that the students in the class were of any concern. Instead, her stated focus was on her dislike of the teacher and the practice of looping.

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5. It was not until after her request to move her daughter to another teacher was denied that she raised to administration, for the very first time, a claim of bullying.

6. At that time, the parent requested that this claim of bullying NOT be investigated by the school. The school was not legally permitted to honor this request and told the parent so. Even though the parent's report was not made until the following school year; it was still investigated. Therefore, the first of two investigations was conducted.

7. The first investigation was completed in accordance with State regulations. As part of this investigation, the student herself was interviewed and her statement documented. On a side note, let me say here, that this investigation was conducted by staff members, including an anti-bullying specialist, with years of experience working with young students, counseling them, and ferreting out answers to questions relating to tough situations. These folks are highly trained in assessing the credibility of students of this age. And are highly trained under the State's harassment, intimidation and bullying laws.

8. In speaking with the anti-bullying specialist, the student confirmed that she liked her teacher and did not confirm much of what the parent claimed.

9. The staff involved in this classroom and in this school are well aware that every claim is to be reported and every claim is to be looked into and addressed, no matter how minor. On camera in the news reports, the child stated that she told her teacher and her teacher said "you're a smart girl, you can handle it yourself." This statement was taken completely out of context; this student did not complain to her teacher and the teacher did not observe any bullying. In fact, for 6-7 periods each week, there was a second teacher in this class both last year and this year. This teacher also did not observe any bullying.

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10. Those experienced personnel who conducted the investigation determined that the claim -- raised only by this parent and only after she requested a different teacher because the parent did not like the teacher -- was unsubstantiated. This investigation included interviewing students and staff and no part of the claim could be substantiated. Nevertheless, the administration did not ignore this issue. Instead, it took action to ensure the classroom teacher was carefully monitoring the classroom environment and the young lady's comfort within the classroom; set up follow up meetings with the parents; separate this young lady to the extent possible in the classroom from those identified by her parent as being of concern; speak with every member of the staff with direct teaching or supervisory responsibility over this young lady; have the school counselor observe the classroom; and provide individual counseling sessions to all students identified.

11. As with every instance of harassment, intimidation, and bullying, when the investigation was complete, it was reported to the Board of Education. The parent was advised of the outcome of this investigation -- in writing and verbally. The parent was advised of the right to appeal to the Board, and to request a hearing before the Board. No such appeal was taken. Despite this fact, the Board still reviewed the investigation and the outcome before making a determination to accept the findings of the investigation and the recommendation of the Superintendent of Schools. The Board undertakes this review with every instance of harassment, intimidation, and bullying. The parent was advised of the right to appeal the Board's decision to the Commissioner of Education. No such appeal was taken. LET ME REPEAT THAT, AS IT IS CRITICALLY IMPORTANT. The law provides a mechanism to object to both the Superintendent's decision and the Board's decision on a claim of harassment, intimidation, and bullying. The parent in this case went to the media instead of availing herself of that right, that opportunity.

12. As noted in my statement to parents last week, but which I believe bears repeating here: Given the care with which Springfield's school

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administrators make their HIB assessments, and the scrutiny with which the Board thereafter reviews those assessments, Springfield's HIB determinations are rarely appealed, and they have never been overturned by the Commissioner. This is important to us as a District, as it signals that our procedures are comprehensive and our staff is trained and fully knowledgeable in this area. Nevertheless, because of the importance of the security and comfort of your children, we continue to require ongoing training for our staff.

13. Despite the thoroughness of the internal investigation, when the District was first presented with a doctor's note regarding this student -- a fact publicized recently by the parent in the media, which is the only reason I am acknowledging this fact now -- it immediately requested that the parent authorize District medical professionals to confer with their private physician. As many of you are aware, federal and State laws, such as HIPAA, require that physicians obtain written authorization prior to consulting with or sharing protected health information. This parent initially refused our request. There have been many inaccurate reports in the media of the District's delay in addressing these claims. There was no delay. And so, LET ME REPEAT THAT SO IT IS CLEAR: This parent initially refused our request. After this denial, a second written request was made by the school administration. It was not until after that second written request was made that the request was honored by the parent.

14. I will not address the substance of any doctor's note or other confidential student or medical records. It is my understanding from various interviews with media members that the parent has not released these records; therefore, respectfully, the public does not have all the information. And we are not authorized to speak in any more detail about such matters.

15. At this time, at my direction, our outside legal counsel conducted a second investigation. Pertinent potential witnesses were re-interviewed and the procedures followed by the District during the first investigation were reviewed for a determination on compliance with State

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law. This investigation has been completed. The conclusion is that the District followed the proper procedure and that there is no harassment, intimidation or bullying as has been alleged in the media reports. This is an unfortunate case of a parent who simply wants a new teacher for her child.

16. That fact notwithstanding, the student is not in school. Based upon the media reports and records we have been provided, which we are not privy to discuss publicly, we believe this young lady should not return to the Sandmeier School. Therefore, we offered the parent a transfer. Currently, the District is providing home instruction.

17. It should be clear that we are offering this accommodation to the parent in an effort to put this matter to rest. Indeed, despite the parent's claims, while she has been keeping her daughter out of school, we have been advised that her daughter has been socializing with the same students she says have been bullying her, including going to their homes.

18. We are fortunate in this District that we have two schools that educate our children in grades 3-5. Therefore, based upon what we have seen in the media reports and what has been conveyed to our professionals by this family and through their attorney, we believe this student would be better educated at the Caldwell School. As our District is not geographically that large and all students in Springfield matriculate first at Walton, this young lady would have the benefit of finishing her 4th and 5th grade years at a nearby school with students with whom she attended school just a year and half ago.

19. The alternative would be to return her to a school she has expressed on camera in the media to having a fear of returning. We cannot in good conscience do that based upon these stated fears. All 4th graders have lunch and recess together at Sandmeier. Therefore, the best option for her is Caldwell.

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20. Unfortunately, the parent has rejected this as an educational option. We are simply perplexed as to why a parent so adamant that her child be removed would not immediately accept this offer.

21. As reported in the media this young lady is “riddled with anxiety and sadness” and, in her words, wants to be away from her “enemies.” To do so completely, she needs to change schools.

This parent has gone to the media without first looking to speak with the Superintendent or appealing the HIB decision to the Board or the Commissioner, and now they refuse to allow the District to educate her in an environment that will be free from the very situation she has expressed as anxiety-causing. As educators, we find this to be sad and disappointing. As we remind everyone that this began simply because we denied a parent’s request for a new teacher.

We hope that this family will allow us to return her to school, where she belongs.

As I have stated before, I have been involved personally in the situation reported by the media and am aware of and oversee all alleged instances of HIB, the investigations, and the determinations. The safety and security of the students in our districts is of the utmost concern to the administration, the Board of Education, and myself. The school administration and staff at the Sandmeier School followed all applicable State laws and regulations, and all locally developed processes and procedures. I have every confidence that they act, every day, in the best interests of the children of Springfield. I hope we can get back to focusing on our children, including one young lady we would love to have back in school.

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