

LICKING HEIGHTS LOCAL SCHOOLS

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Dear Families:

I am writing as a follow up to this morning's voicemail message regarding an incident within the school district that was found to be a verbal threat of school violence. As the day has progressed, now I am able to provide more information, but there are still limitations in how much information I can share because the matter is an active investigation involving one of our students.

Before the school day started, school district and Pataskala Police officials received information about a potential threat to Central Middle School. Our school district, along with several districts throughout Ohio, has been the recipient of copycat threats following the recent tragedy in Parkland, Florida. Nonetheless, we take all reports very seriously.

Although this is an active investigation, students, parents and staff did the right thing by communicating concerns. Information was provided verbally, in writing and through images. All this information led to a discussion among students, social media and direct communication with school and police officials. This information allowed the matter to be investigated before the student entered the school building and, in fact, the student was escorted into the building, immediately questioned, and was fully supervised throughout the investigation that culminated in the student taken into police custody.

In the aftermath of today's incident, it keeps school safety at the forefront of our school district as well as school districts throughout the nation. Ultimately, there are questions about why such threats and acts of violence occur. Although I wish there were a singular answer, there is not, but we continue to function in two primary ways.

First, we continue to make enhancements to keep the environment safe. To protect the security of our plans, I will not provide specific details, but we have a close working relationship with local police authorities and we continue to provide enhancements in the environment to provide additional safety and security. For example, this year we deployed a door barricade device, but this is one of many measures. Additionally, we have biometric readers and a door lock system at school entrances, extensive video surveillance, and our school offices are equipped with an enhanced system that directly connects to 911 and first responders. The preceding is not an exhaustive list and, again, I am not providing too many details because to do so would compromise the integrity of our security plans; however, rest assured our school safety plans are periodically reviewed and evaluated by the Department of Homeland Security.

Second, we need to remember that communication is key in such matters. As written above, communications from students, parents and staff were critical to the investigation; however, communication should also occur before a potential crisis. One of the better guidance documents about talking with children about violence or potential violence is produced by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP).

Click the following link and/or see the attached: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/talking-to-children-about-violence-tips-for-parents-and-teachers> I encourage you to use this document as a guide when you initiate and/or continue to engage your children in dialog.

Finally, after today's incident, emotions are high and I continue to remind others that we must stay vigilant about school safety. We encourage everyone to report any suspicious activity to the proper authority, including police, sheriff and school officials. During school hours, parents should call their building's office and provide as much detail as possible. Also, Licking Heights Local Schools subscribes to the SaferOH tip line (844-SaferOH/844-723-3764) that is available 24 hours a day.

As always, if you have any questions, please contact us.

Sincerely,

Philip Wagner, Ph.D.
Superintendent