



SOUTH SENECA

CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Dear South Seneca Community,

The country is reeling yet again from another school shooting this week, and all our shock and outrage at the news of elementary students being killed at their school in Texas make us turn our attention back home. Understandably, we've been hearing from parents today about how we keep our own kids safe in Interlaken and Ovid, and I want to outline that for everyone here:

First, we've invested capital monies over the last ten years to increase security measures in the buildings themselves, including the transition to electronic access at outside doors, increased layers of entry at the main office in each building (with security cameras on those doors), an overall increase in both the number and quality of security cameras across both campuses, and specialized equipment specifically designed for situations where we might be in a lockdown or lockout status.

Of course, as many have reminded us, just because a door can be locked doesn't help if it is not locked. We send regular reminders to everyone using our spaces that doors should never be propped open or left unlocked unless it's purposely unlocked to admit the public for an event.

Secondly, it is true that South Seneca has never hired armed security guards at our buildings. We do, however, have a close working relationship with all area law enforcement agencies, particularly with the Seneca County Sheriff's Office, which does incredible work in this county. South Seneca has a contract with the SCSO to supply a School Resource Officer (SRO) to the district every school day (and even during our extended day program). We've heard some confusion this month about "leave time" for the SRO, but it should be well understood that although Deputy McNabb is primarily assigned to us as our SRO, our contract is not with one person but with the office itself, and SCSO provides other deputies any time Deputy McNabb is deployed elsewhere. Our communication with the Sheriff's Office is daily, and they provide dedicated attention to our buildings every school day, no matter what the circumstance. It is difficult to overstate how fortunate we are to have them as a close partner, and their office is on call to us 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Some have suggested that we should strive for a second dedicated deputy so that we can provide a regular presence in each of our buildings at all times, and it's something we continue to talk about. It's certainly true that the role of a School Resource Officer is not the same as that of a security guard, but if we continue to hear that our community would feel safer under those circumstances, we must take that into consideration.

Third, we've also invested in recent years in a larger full-time number of staff dedicated to student and family support, which includes an ongoing process of knowing each student well. We conduct a weekly meeting in each building to talk about things we notice about kids who are suffering, exhibiting different behaviors, going through traumatic situations at home or with others, or otherwise showing signs of needing help. Each building has two school counselors, a school social worker, and a school psychologist. We've used federal stimulus money to create two other positions designed specifically to provide student supports built into the school day. That's unusual for a school our size. Even more, we enter into agreements with the county to provide ADDITIONAL counselors to South Seneca to take on caseloads. When someone in our community is suffering or showing signs of unusual behavior, we have a team of support to respond and connect that student and family to more services.

As we've addressed just recently (and will continue to address), we have a well established, formal process to conduct threat assessments any time these unusual behaviors create a potential safety concern. It's a frequently shared, but still very helpful, phrase that is heard throughout our buildings that if you "see something, say something," and we follow up every time someone makes a report.

The pandemic was enormously disruptive in so many ways, and that included a disruption to our regular routine of emergency drills over the last two years. Even so, staff and faculty remain trained for these situations, and all have protocols to follow under different emergency conditions. We've compensated with modified student drills and information for emergency situations the last two years, and expect to return to normal operations for those moving into 2022-23.

Never, ever, will you hear anyone say "it couldn't happen here." We understand how the nature of a school building can make us vulnerable to a random attack, but we do want our community to know how our ongoing safety plans—revisited multiple times a year—make us as prepared as we can be to protect our children. In the meantime, our own counselors have made themselves available to those who are wanting to talk about this week's tragedy, and I myself am happy to reach out to people personally who want to learn more.

Thank you,
Steve