DEPEW UNION FREE SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Depew Union Free
School District

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I would like to take this opportunity to review recent events, specifically online threats to schools. Let me begin by setting the context for what occurred last week (December 13th through December 17th) and how and why various schools may have responded in the manner that they did.

As we all know, there have been a number of social media stories circulating in the past several months, particularly on TikTok and/or SnapChat, making 'national threats' to schools across the country. It is important to know that we are always in communication with law enforcement, including the FBI and specifically working closely with our School Resource Officer, Officer Hossfeld and the Village of Depew Police Department regarding any concerning social media posts. If at any time, we find that there are credible threats to our students, teachers or schools in general, please know that we would take immediate and appropriate action. Last week, there were no threats toward Depew Schools.

After a thorough investigation, the threat circulating on social media last week was determined to originate in a High School in Florida. Authorities apprehended that individual earlier last week. Again, we never had any indication of any threat here in Depew.

Unfortunately, this kind of social media behavior is becoming more common. That said, we will always take these kinds of threats very seriously. If any concerning post is deemed even potentially credible, we will take every action necessary, to best ensure the health, safety and welfare of our students, staff and school community. Fortunately, law enforcement has become quite effective at tracking and prosecuting the individuals who make these kinds of posts.

Furthermore, it is important for our school-community to remember that we are constantly monitoring our students' online activity on school devices through two platforms, Gaggle, which monitors all emails and Securely, which monitors web based searches.

In response to last week's social media threats, some schools chose to send out school-community wide messaging, some chose to inform faculty and staff about the non-credible threat and some chose not send any messaging. Some of those that chose to send out messaging or close schools had some level of internal threats either ongoing over the week or occurring on that particular day. Again, we did not have any credible threat and in consultation with the Police Department, we felt that sending out messaging could just

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cause more unintended consequences and potential copycats. We did however inform our faculty and staff and increase our police presence on the campus.

If you recall, several years ago and even more recently, there have been some bomb threats made to schools and schools were forced to shut down for the day. When the television media would cover these bomb threats, copycats followed suit and more schools had to close. Once the media stopped covering these bomb threats, the incidences dropped significantly and for years, there were none. The new media is now social media and if respond to non-credible threats on social media, we will have to continue to respond and when there is an actual credible threat, the school-community can become desensitized.

It is important to note, that the number of threats often increase after a high-profile violent attack, such as a school shooting, as does the risk of another similar attack. In fact, more than 150 threats surfaced nationwide in just the week after the school shooting in Oxford, Michigan, when there were 151 school threats recorded for the entire month of September this school year; that is a fivefold increase over the number seen in a typical September. Copycat events and threats after an attack occur because perpetrators often desire attention and notice how the person responsible for the original crime is receiving notoriety in the news and on social media. In their minds, "You want to be famous; it doesn't matter what you're famous for". In addition, a kid could think, "I made a threat and it worked, we don't have school, so I'm going to do that again." Copycats create copycats and you get into this cycle of threat closure, threat closure, threat closure, so it becomes very difficult. Last week, students on social media promoted school shootings to take place on December 17th; for many students across the country, the last day of classes was December 17th and before their winter break. The trend originated on TikTok, as a way for students to skip school. It then spread to other internet platforms like Instagram and Facebook and morphed into something much more disturbing.

This situation serves as a good example of why it is important for students to avoid sharing posts online that refer to school safety threats. Even if they are not credible threats, they can sometimes cause stress, anxiety and trauma for our students, families and staff. We appreciate the efforts that our families continuously make to monitor their children's social media activity and speak with them about proper online behavior.

In conclusion, it is important to note that if you ever see or hear of any kind of a potential threat on social media or anywhere else, please call or email the Police Department, Officer Hossfeld and/or any school administrator as soon as possible. Please refrain from posting or reposting these types of threats or information on any community Facebook or other social media platforms, as this does not assist the District or the proper authorities to respond appropriately. This actually has the unintended consequences of facilitating fear and misinformation. Once we are properly notified, we will then take immediate and appropriate action to ensure the health and safety of all of our students, faculty and staff.

Sincerely,
Jeffrey R. Rabey Ph.D.
Superintendent of Schools

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