



## DEPEW UNION FREE SCHOOL DISTRICT

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To the Families of the Depew School-Community;

Collectively, as a nation, as a state and specifically as the Depew School-Community, we continue to process and recover from the tragedy that occurred just eleven short days ago in our beloved city of Buffalo and now we are presented with another mass loss of young lives in Texas. As the national conversation continues to evolve, one of the most prevalent questions being asked is, "What could have been done to prevent it?" The answer is multi-layered and at its inception is the issue of threats of violence and the importance of a fair and critical assessment. It's in this stage that we have an opportunity for prevention.

As your superintendent of schools, I can honestly tell you that my first priority, each and every day, is the safety and security of our children within our schools and I feel it is important for me to outlay a few messages for everyone to understand. When a threat of violence is received, the first duty of any school-community (students, parents, faculty, staff and administrators) is to acknowledge and communicate the threat - no matter how small. Essentially, if you see / hear / know something, you need to say something. Our entire school-community must understand there is a process in place to help understand the nature and contexts of threats and make the distinction between a joke and a credible threat, between a transient threat and a substantive one. And, most of all, it's important that we acknowledge this process exists to help and protect our schools and our communities.

A transient threat can be a joke or something said in a moment of emotion, which can be resolved quickly through mediation or counseling. On the other hand, a substantive threat is very serious, often involving the use of a weapon, strategy or specific target. When in doubt, a threat should always be treated as substantive.

As this national conversation continues in the coming weeks and ideas from all across the spectrum continue to become the next sound bite, we need to be vigilant in protecting our children and at the same time engage with them in the conversation. These high profile acts of violence, particularly in schools, can confuse and frighten children, who may feel in danger or worry that their friends or loved-ones are at risk. They will look to us for information and guidance on how to react. Collectively, we can help children feel safe by continuing to establish a sense of normalcy and security and talking with them about their fears. Here are some key thoughts:

- **Reassure children that they are safe.** Emphasize that our schools are very safe. Validate their feelings. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings, help put them into perspective, and assist them in

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expressing these feelings appropriately.

- **Make time to talk.** Let their questions be your guide as to how much information to provide. Be patient; children and youth do not always talk about their feelings readily. Watch for clues that they may want to talk, such as hovering around while you do the dishes or yard work. Some children prefer writing, playing music, or doing an art project as an outlet. Young children may need concrete activities (such as drawing, looking at picture books, or imaginative play) to help them identify and express their feelings.
- **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.**
  - *Early elementary school* children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that their school and homes are safe and that adults are there to protect them. Give simple examples of school safety like reminding children about exterior doors being locked, child monitoring efforts on the playground, and emergency drills practiced during the school day.
  - *Upper elementary and early middle school* children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Discuss efforts of our schools and police department to provide safe schools.
  - *Upper middle school and high school* students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence in schools and society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer and how to prevent tragedies in society. Emphasize the role that students have in maintaining safe schools by following school safety guidelines (e.g. not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers on campus, reporting threats to the school safety made by anyone, etc.), communicating any personal safety concerns to our school administrators, and accessing support for emotional needs whenever needed.
- **Review safety procedures.** This should include procedures and safeguards at school and at home. Help children identify at least one adult at school and in the community to whom they go if they feel threatened or at risk.
- **Observe children's emotional state.** Some children may not express their concerns verbally. Be sure to monitor their social media accounts. Changes in behavior, appetite, and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of anxiety or discomfort. In most children, these symptoms will ease with reassurance and time. However, some children may be at risk for more intense reactions. Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Seek the help of a mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

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- **Limit television viewing of these events.** Limit television viewing and be aware if the television is on in common areas. Developmentally inappropriate information can cause anxiety or confusion, particularly in young children. Adults also need to be mindful of the content of conversations that they have with each other in front of children, even teenagers, and limit their exposure to vengeful, hateful, and angry comments that might be misunderstood.
- **Maintain a normal routine.** Keeping to a regular schedule can be reassuring and promote physical health. Ensure that children get plenty of sleep, regular meals, and exercise. Encourage them to keep up with their schoolwork and extracurricular activities but don't push them if they seem overwhelmed.

As always, our top priority is the safety and well-being of each of our students - your children. This is a responsibility we take very seriously. It's important for you to know that help is always available through your schools. If you ever hear of a potential threat or are ever concerned about your child or feel they may need additional support, and you would like to speak with one of our school counselors, please contact us. For Cayuga Heights Elementary at 686-5004; Middle School at 686-5055; High School at 686-5069; or at my office at 686-5105.

In closing, we will look to learn what we can from this latest tragedy and use that information over the coming weeks to determine what improvements we can make in security and response procedures. It is important to note that we have a very close relationship with the Depew Police Department and they are very responsive whenever there is a need to support the safety and security of our schools. Please continue to keep the community of Uvalde, Texas and the students, parents, teachers and staff of the Robb Elementary School in your thoughts and prayers.

Thank you.

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

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