

SCHOOL UNION 76

BROOKLIN – DEER ISLE-STONINGTON CSD – SEDGWICK

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Office of the Superintendent

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“It takes a whole community to educate a child.”

Superintendent’s Memo

To: Deer Isle-Stonington Parents & Guardians
From: Christian M. Elkington
Re: Supporting students when dealing with tragedy.
Date: 3-10-19

As we all know too well, dealing with death is never easy. Dealing with the death of a young person is especially difficult as we feel deprived of the promise of the life lost. Our hearts go out to the Jones family for the pain and agony they are going through at this time.

We know that some parents and guardians were not happy with how we handled this situation. Dealing with a death as a school and district is especially difficult as our students and staff come with differing experiences, which means there is no clear path for how to best support those impacted by the tragedy. Although we received the information early enough to allow for some planning, it was a particularly difficult situation to react to because the information came to us after the school day had started and it directly involved so many of our students, families and staff. We were also very aware that our parents and guardians had not been able to assess the situation and determine their next steps. We were left having to decide what we needed to do next for the many students who could be impacted.

I felt we had to act. I know from my experience having dealt directly with 19 student deaths and another dozen parent ones that situations such as this impact an entire school quickly. We felt it was critical to support our students by trying to control how, by whom and where the news of this death would be shared with them. We were concerned that:

- 7th and 8th graders moving to the high school for classes would check their phones during lunch or hear the news from high school students and bring back what they learned to others
- As some of our parents picked up their children because of this tragedy, other students would be left wondering why their classmates would be leaving
- Students going on the bus would hear about the death from high school students.

These were all situations we felt we could not allow to happen as our staff would not be available to help students process the information, give them reassurance or share kindness, concern or compassion. By stepping in as we did with an age-level appropriate response we feel we were able to assist many of our students and keep the situation somewhat contained. I need to take a moment to publicly thank each and every member of our staff for the kindness, respect and care they gave to our students in this time of need.

Please know whenever we have a difficult situation we look at what we did to see where improvements can be made. We have reviewed the events of the last week and already have ideas for possible improvements. However, it is vital that we have your thoughts and ideas as part of this review. Principal McKechnie has been reaching out to discuss the situation with some of those we know are upset with what we did and wants to talk to more of you. She will be holding a series of meetings to get further input. Information about these meetings will be sent to you shortly. We then will use the information collected to determine future steps and adjustments to what we will do when we are forced to face a similar event.

Good people can certainly disagree and sometimes those of us who have the responsibility to run our schools will need to make decisions that not everyone will agree with. We know and respect the rights of our parents and community members to disagree and want them to share their concerns. Unfortunately, some of the information being shared on Facebook is not completely accurate about what happened and/or our intent behind the efforts we made.

As school professionals, we will not engage in what we hear about or see on Facebook and other social media outlets as that is not our place, but that does not mean we don't care or agree with what is being said. Instead we must use our energy to keep our focus on your children, our students and what it will take to help them be the best that they can be! I hope you will attend one of the meetings with Principal McKechnie or call her so that we can get your input directly.

Thanks for reading this note!