



West Orange Public Schools
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Superintendent of Schools

J. Scott Cascone, Ed. D.

November 20, 2019

Dear West Orange Public School Community,

Last week, November 14th, our nation experienced another school shooting tragedy in Santa Clarita, California at Saugus High School. When an event such as this occurs, it fills us with many emotions. We empathize and grieve for those who lost loved ones and for the community, survivors, and families permanently changed as a result of the senseless violence. It also leads us to think could this happen in our community, and are we doing all we can to prevent it?

I write you this correspondence in order to bring some measure of comfort and reassurance relative to the safety and security of our school community. Please know, our administrative team, security staff, in partnership with local law-enforcement, and I am working daily to maintain the security of our schools. Further, this is a top priority and focus for the West Orange Board of Education.

In various parent and town hall meetings, I have referred to a two-prong approach to school security. The first is hardening the targets of our schools. In addition to the regular emergency drills in which our staff and students engage on a regular basis, the district has undertaken a number of proactive steps to further secure the facilities.

In partnership with StoneGate Associates, our security consultants, a security audit was conducted last year for the entire district and all its buildings and facilities. The security audit was used to inform and write the federal C.O.P.S Security Grant which is now being utilized to perform a number of key security upgrades to our buildings. For the sake of security, I am not at liberty to go into great detail as to what those are but, suffice it to say, when this work is completed our security infrastructure will be significantly enhanced.

Also through that audit, our security consultants worked with district administration and staff to revise and completely update our emergency management plans. All school staff will be trained in 2020 on these new emergency management plans. We are also developing security and emergency management plan resources which will be at the easy disposal of all staff members including substitute educators. I am working collaboratively with the school PTAs and outside organizations that would utilize our facilities after school to ensure that they are equipped informed and prepared to activate security emergency management drills when necessary. Finally, in the development of the buildings and grounds budget for the 2020-2021 school-year, we will be putting a critical eye on utilizing district funds to further reinforce our security infrastructure in our buildings.

The second prong or approach to school security centers on school district and school climate environment, and culture. I am a firm believer that if we are placing a focus on meeting both the academic and social emotional needs of all of our children, ensuring that children are noticed and tended to, this can go a long way to maintain safety and security in our buildings. To this end, the district has invested significant resources in ensuring that all schools are staffed with mental health professionals and/or school counseling staff.

As evidenced in our district goals, the district has placed a priority on the premise of social emotional learning for students and examining ways in which we can better serve all of our students. We are also placing substantial resources into parental involvement in training in the areas of substance-abuse and best practices and parenting. We recently held a parent workshop entitled “Raising Resilient Teens” at Liberty Middle School and the substance-abuse awareness program “Hidden in Plain Sight” at the high school. The district is also in the process of applying for a \$7,000 Vaping Prevention grant. We understand that substance-abuse is often an outgrowth of mental health conditions and/or a cause of them and the importance of nurturing healthy minded and bodied students.

I am also in the process of working collaboratively with community partners to put together a parent forum which addresses the premise of “See Something, Say Something” and ways in which all of our community members can be vigilant partners in recognizing warning signs within our community and its citizens. This point underscores the important role which parents, guardians, students and staff can play in ensuring the safety and security of our buildings. First, we would we ask for and appreciate your cooperation in following what we know can sometimes feel like restrictive practices with regard to entering our buildings. We want our schools to be welcome, opening places but at the same time need to err on the side of caution and support our building principals in these regards. As residents of neighborhoods and of the community, you may hear things and you may see things that could be troublesome. Please know, that our district administration central offices, as well as our local law enforcement officials are here to receive any calls or concerns you may have. It’s better to say something and have it turn out to be nothing than the opposite.

By taking practical, realistic, and proactive steps to harden our facilities to threats, and at the same time, work collectively to foster an environment of kindness, acceptance, and inclusion while remaining vigilant, we can establish a sanctuary within our borders.

Please stay tuned for future advisories, and parent programs, which we strongly encourage you to attend. And if you have any questions, feel free to please contact my office.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Scott Cascone". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

J. Scott Cascone, Ed. D.
Superintendent