



KINGSWAY REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

Committed to Excellence

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Dear Parents/Guardians:

On Wednesday, November 11th, we had the misfortune of dealing with potentially threatening comments on social media. The original posts were anonymous, and the unique choice of words elevated our concern to a “threat-level.” At the point the initial post was brought to our attention, law enforcement was made aware of the posting and the internal investigation that was underway. Follow up posts using the word “shooting” and images of guns were soon thereafter brought to our attention, which only served to heighten our alarm. We immediately notified law enforcement of these new postings in an effort to collaboratively identify and apprehend all of the suspects.

The threat we addressed on Wednesday was invalidated as it turned out to be a hoax. The intent of the students involved was not to harm anyone but to initiate a gossip column using social media. The follow up posts only served to exasperate the situation. This proved to be an example of when our students do not appreciate the magnitude of social media and how quickly misuse can result in hysteria.

I do want to take a moment to thank the Woolwich Twp. Police Department and the County Prosecutor’s office for their diligence in handling this situation. I also want to thank many of our students and parents who provided relevant information to assist during the investigation. As a result, we were able to identify the students involved and hold them accountable for their comments and the panic that ensued.

Today, Mr. Stephenson delivered a prepared statement to the entire student body, addressing this issue. He later shared that statement with all of you. During S.M.A.R.T. lunch, we held an assembly for our 10th grade class in the Eitel Theater where a number of us had the opportunity to address the incident, assure our students that they were safe, and discuss the potential dangers of inappropriate social media use.

Below is a summary of the points we emphasized with our students:

1. **It’s all public.** Even when you think you are part of a “closed group,” consider what may happen if someone copies a post and forwards it to others. Conversations are never private on social media.
2. **No such thing as anonymity.** We can identify any individual on social media by tracking the IP Address. In this case the individual created a fictitious identity, which we could eventually

Home of the Dragons

track to the original owner. With cooperation from law enforcement, once a subpoena is obtained, it's only a matter of time before we identify the anonymous individual.

3. **Social media is permanent.** Although the students deleted their comments/posts within two hours of posting, the posts were copied, forwarded, and sent to thousands of people in a fraction of that time. Consider a social media post permanent.
4. **Cyber threats can be considered criminal activity.** Any threat and/or comments that may be perceived as a potential threat by an objective person, will heighten the awareness of school officials, law enforcement, and more. In this case, we cooperated with our local police department as well as the County Prosecutor's office and had correspondence with the FBI. Cyber threats can be considered criminal activity and could potentially have consequences that could be difficult to recover from.
5. **Be responsible and respectful when using social media.** Too many of our students use social media inappropriately. Most of the posts we see are not elevated to a threat-level but have been found to be mean, insensitive, and harassing in nature. Our students should speak to one another online no differently than how they speak to their peers, parents, and teachers in person. Remember to be respectful when interacting with others.

I am asking that our parents reiterate these important points with their children. Unfortunately, we have had far too many uncomfortable parent meetings where students, good students for that matter, have gotten themselves in a lot of trouble as a result of social media misuse. The phones our kids carry today can be dangerous and too often are used as weapons.

What can parents do?

When it comes to social media and internet use, our parents are the first line of defense. Many of the issues we deal with are a result of activity that occurs outside of school hours. Inappropriate comments, pictures, and/or threats are usually brought to our attention by an alleged victim or observer of the behavior. As parents, there are a few things we can begin doing immediately that will help teach our children responsible and respectful social media use.

1. **Monitor social media use.** If you don't do this now, please begin to monitor your child's social media activity and address inappropriate behavior immediately. It only takes one regrettable post for your child to lose a lot of privileges here at school.
2. **Think before you post.** As parents, we model the behavior our children replicate. Unfortunately, too many adults engage in inappropriate behavior when using social media themselves. Keep in mind that our children see this behavior and often act similarly while on social media. Parents who model appropriate social media behavior help to teach our children how to conduct themselves respectfully.
3. **Report suspicious activity.** Anytime you see suspicious activity or potentially threatening comments, please report them to law enforcement immediately. If comments are geared



toward the bullying and/or harassing of other students, please report those comments to the school principal immediately.

4. **Social media is not a reliable source of information.** If you have questions regarding your child's school, please go to the website for more information. You can also call your child's principal for accurate information. Too often we see comments on social media attempting to address or clarify a school-related issue that are often inaccurate, misleading, and/or irresponsible. If you want to know, call us, we are always happy to provide accurate and reliable information.

Planning Ahead

As an administrative team, we continue to evaluate our safety and security measures at Kingsway. We work closely with law enforcement and conduct drills on a regular basis. In light of this recent incident, we will convene as a team and investigate how we can improve upon these measures. I can also tell you that we take threats and potential threats seriously and will not tolerate any behavior that harms the safety and welfare of our students.

Looking ahead we have scheduled Brian Peticari, Detective with Gloucester County's High Tech Crime Unit to address internet safety & social media behaviors with our middle school students on Monday, November 23rd. Parents will be invited to attend this presentation at 9:30 a.m. More information will be sent to you in the coming days. We are also investigating a similar presentation at the high school in the coming weeks.

In closing, I thank you for your patience and cooperation during the past 24-hours. Should you have any additional questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at your convenience.

Very truly yours,



Dr. James J. Lavender
Superintendent of Schools

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