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Superintendent

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To: Twinfield School Families and Staff

From: Mark Tucker, Superintendent

Subj: School Safety and Security

We recently dealt with an incident at Twinfield that involved a serious threat of violence by one student against another. In this most recent case, the student who made the threat was believed to have access to weapons. This is not the first time something like this has happened at school, and I am concerned about the increased tendency of some students to make threatening statements against their peers. So, without getting into specifics about any of these cases, I thought it would be a good time for me to review with the school community what our practice is when we receive reports such as this.

The first thing I want all of you to understand is that we have a zero tolerance policy when it comes to any reported threat towards students or staff, on campus or off. This applies even in cases where one might reasonably think, "Oh, s/he is just joking, it's not serious." There is nothing funny about a threat of violence, and we will not guess about the speaker's intent or means to carry it out. I can tell you that in past cases involving the threatened use of guns, we contacted the Vermont State Police and asked them to assist by investigating the credibility of the report. For their part, since the averted school shooting incident at Fairhaven High School in February 2018, the Vermont State Police has also adopted a zero tolerance policy and they have committed to immediate and direct investigation when we file such a report. In all cases, this has meant a timely visit with the families and children involved in the alleged threat by a Vermont State Police Trooper, at school if it happens during school hours, at home if it happens after school. We will continue to report any concerns that we have in this area to the Vermont State Police, and you can rest assured that they will follow up. It is their job, with their experience and investigative skills, to make a determination as to the credibility of the report, and we rely on their report to decide if additional actions need to be taken by the administration. In the cases at Twinfield, the VSP did not take action against the students involved, and no community-wide warning was needed.

The second thing I want you all to understand is that our actions in response to these reports, as with all other reports of school behavior such as alleged bullying, are governed by a complex mix of Vermont Statute and Federal privacy restrictions. The practical effect of this is that we cannot report specific details that identify individuals who are involved in these incidents to the broader community. That said, if at any time we find that there is a credible threat against the school community, we will communicate and act more broadly in the name of safety.

A determination by the VSP that a threat is not a credible threat does not relieve us of our responsibility to get to the bottom of the incident – who said what to whom and why – and we will address that behavior through our normal discipline procedures.

So, in summary, here again are the main takeaways:

- Threats or jokes about harming others will be taken seriously.
- We investigate all such incidents, and when the threat is extreme (especially, but not limited to, the potential use of weapons), we **will** call the Vermont State Police, and if it involves your child this **will** result in a visit by a Trooper to school or your home.
- We report these incidents as soon as we learn of them, but do not make general announcements to the community unless and until it is determined to be a credible threat. Please understand that the VSP and Administration are on top of this, but each incident is unique, and our response is measured against the severity of the threat.

It is clear to me that some of our students struggle with how to express their frustration with each other. Why these disagreements evolve to a threat of violent weapons is still a puzzle to me – is it our culture? Have our students been desensitized by media/video games/social media? I don't know, but our administrators and counselors are working on the problem. The peer culture is tolerating much of this, and I am more worried about the cases we *don't* hear about. In many cases, students are reluctant to report these comments to responsible adults out of fear of retribution or being ostracized as a tattletale, but then we end up with escalation to much more serious infractions.

I am respectfully asking our families to talk to their children about our concerns over threats of violence, of any type, in whatever way makes sense to you as the responsible caregivers. When you do, please encourage them to report any rumor or specific threat they hear about. However you go about this, my hope is that your children will understand that threats of violence are not okay and if a threat is directed at them, we are here to help them. Our school counselors are available to provide advice on how to have such a conversation without causing unnecessary fear.

We have and will continue to do all we can to provide a safe and respectful learning environment for our students and staff, and I appreciate your support in these efforts. I thank you for your time, and for helping us to support your children at Twinfield School.



Mark Tucker, M.A.
Superintendent of Schools