



# Tomorrow's News Today

*News From the Tomorrow River School District*

*From Michael Toelle, District Administrator*

April 2018

## Not In My School

I would like to take this perfect opportunity to talk about a hot topic lately on safety in our schools.

The following is a synopsis of what took place on Thursday, March 15<sup>th</sup> and during the next 24 hours. With this recent event, we come to realize how the entire community can work together to make sure we are always looking at clues and recognize when something seems out of someone's character.

At exactly 3:04, Mr. Tubbs called me and stated "we have an issue as writing was found in the bathroom." He continued to explain the situation and I left a Charter School meeting and returned back at 3:29. As an administrative team, we sat down with a member of the Portage County Sheriff's Department to draft a message to put out to the general public through our Blackboard alert system. The team also brainstormed to determine what our procedures would be for Friday morning. Once our plan was in place, team members worked on their tasks, made their appropriate phone calls, and prepared their area for Friday morning. From that point on, once the Blackboard message went out, social media was alive with information and misinformation. Within 60 minutes, I had seen the exact message that was sent out through Blackboard changed to include words about guns, shooting, and accusatory comments. Social media can be good, but typically the truth can get stretched beyond belief. My personal cell phone and home phone were also nonstop with messages, texts, calls, and e-mails.

Friday, March 16<sup>th</sup> started early and once at school, I started checking with my administrative team to make sure everything was set. The Portage County officers started rolling in and by shortly after 7:00 a.m. there were 12 officers at school. Students starting showing up and at 7:30 the doors opened and staff started checking backpacks prior to entry. Attendance was very low at about 35%, and the precautionary measure of checking bags was successful. During student arrival, I was working with Sheriff Lukas on the development of a second Blackboard message which was more descriptive and calming for the public. Officers did stay in the building for the remainder of the day.

Times are changing and if some of you would think back to about 30 years ago, if a message was written on the bathroom wall, likely it would have been erased with little thought given to it being a real threat. With the Nationwide Walk-out on March 14<sup>th</sup>, numerous school

shootings, and constant remarks on the news about school/public officials having missed the clues, the words “Look out for Friday 16<sup>th</sup>” and “I’m coming” written by the same individual on our bathroom wall couldn’t be dismissed. If I had to do it all over again, I would make the same call and implement the same procedures, but would make sure to include everything else that was learned from this situation.

This brings me to the overall point of the story. How do we make sure this never occurs again at Amherst? First, as I told my staff and parents in a letter, the last time something like this occurred was 19 years ago, so it’s not a common occurrence. Nineteen years ago, it was a hand written note found in the bathroom during the middle of the school day. At that time, all students were evacuated to the Jensen Center until they were picked up by their parents. With awareness, luck and the odds, this type of activity may not occur for another 19 years. If we work together as a community, we hope it will never happen again at Amherst.

Here are a few critical areas parents can help with to make sure the entire school community is safe. First of all, it’s common knowledge that students talk and it’s not any fun to do something like this if nobody knows about it. As parents, if you hear suspicious talk among students, or if your child comments about something they overheard, it’s time to dig a little deeper. Social media is also another great source for information. If you see a post which is questionable, it doesn’t hurt to brainstorm with another parent, turn it over to the school, or even call the Sheriff’s Department for guidance. A student suffering with depression, a student being bullied, a student who is a loner, or even just seeing a major change in student behavior, can be signs that a student needs help. Please don’t think I’m implying all of these behaviors can lead to a student harming the school, but they are common traits which have been pointed out among those who do. Getting the child help is the main goal, which may be connecting with the child’s parents, working with the school guidance counselor, or notifying county officials. Earlier in the year, I used the much used quote “It takes a village to raise a child” and in this case I believe it also takes “a village to keep a village safe”. Let’s work together to keep our school and village safe by recognizing the clues and making sure and communicate with authorities as needed.

Lastly, I do want to give a big “Thank You” to the Portage County Sheriff’s Department for all their help, not only in this situation, but as needed during the course of the school year. It’s been a great partnership and they truly help keep our students safe. I also want to put a shout out for the amazing administrative team that I have to work with. My administrative team includes building principals, department heads, administrative assistants, and counselors. As a team, we effectively worked through the situation with parents, students, staff, and community members. Our community is fortunate to have such a dedicated and caring staff working for the families in the district.

As always, feel free to contact me if you have questions or concerns about school activities, curriculum, or just have a general question. Please remember: my door is always open, my computer is on, and my phone is available to help make the school experience for every child the best possible.

Whether you enjoy spring fishing, turkey hunting, prepping your garden, or getting your yard back in shape, make sure and take some time to enjoy the warm spring temperatures.