



# BURGETTSTOWN AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

100 Bavington Road, Burgettstown, PA 15021-2730

Admin: (724) 947-8136 – MS/HS: (724) 947-8100 – Elem: (724) 947-8150

Admin Fax: (724) 947-8143 – HS Fax: (724) 947-3325

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## **Mr. Stephen P. Puskar Superintendent**

February 14, 2023

The purpose of this letter is to address concerns that may have arisen as a result of inaccurate statements that were made during the public comments portion of last night's school board meeting, specifically as they relate to an incident at BMHS last month.

On January 13<sup>th</sup> (which was an Act 80 ½ day, in-person at the MSHS and remote instruction at the BAEC), a student at BMHS brought a friend to school without asking for permission. Rather than go to class, this friend chose to stay in the restroom, thinking it would be funny to see how long he could do so. Their plan was for the Burgettstown student to go to the friend's school the following school day and do the same thing.

When the BMHS administration and the BASD school police officer, Officer Fisher, were notified that there was an adolescent in the building that was not recognized, they immediately investigated. Officer Fisher found the friend and assessed the situation from a safety standpoint, which is the action to be taken according to our Emergency Operations Plan. It was determined that there was no safety threat present. Officer Fisher then escorted the individual to the office. While escorting him, the individual panicked and decided to run for an exit, and Officer Fisher pursued him. The individual exited the school and ran toward Harmon Creek. Eventually the individual was caught by Smith Township Police; they found him at the BMHS student's house. The individual has been charged with trespassing and his home school district has been notified. The BMHS student was disciplined.

I want to stress the following at this time:

- It was determined that at no time was there a threat to the safety and well-being of any individual on the BASD campus or within the school buildings at any time.
- The situation as assessed, and as addressed in our Emergency Operations Plan, did not warrant a shift to lock down.
- While the BMHS student ordinarily rides a bus to school, it was determined that the student did not ride a bus to school on January 13th. Furthermore, the student's friend did not ride a bus to the school on the 13th.
- The school district contracts for a full-time, armed police officer who is sworn in by the Washington County Courts, and for all intents and purposes operates as a one-person police force, with all of the same privileges as a municipal police officer/force. We are in the process of exploring the feasibility of adding additional armed officers.
- The school district has an excellent cooperative relationship with the Hanover Twp. Police Department, the Smith Township Police Department, and the Pennsylvania State Police, all of whom have jurisdictions within the school district. The school campus is located in Smith Township, so they are a primary contact

for incidents at the schools. Officer Fisher can and does count on the officers from all three departments to assist at any time.

- The school district maintains an Emergency Operations Plan, as required by law. This plan is three years in length, and the current plan runs from 2021 through 2023. The plan will be revised and updated as needed.
- The exterior doors on both school buildings are routinely checked throughout the school day by Officer Fisher and other district personnel.
- The offices in both school buildings contain electronic alert systems for certain exterior doors. We are currently exploring updating and expanding this system.
- Officer Fisher, Administration and the teaching staff monitor student arrival and dismissal, as well as hallways, immediately before, during, and after the school day.
- The school district maintains a security camera network, which is located throughout the school buildings, on district grounds, and at Hill Memorial Stadium.
- The school district has appointed Safety and Security Coordinators, as required by law.
- The school district has a Threat Assessment Team, as required by law.
- The school district conducts routine emergency drills, including fire, safety (lock down, etc), and bus evacuation drills, as required by law.
- The school district conducts safety and security training for employees, with a minimum of three hours of training every five years, as required by law. These trainings are not limited to ALICE training, as ALICE is simply one version of security training and ALICE, specifically, is not a required training. However, training with components similar to ALICE does occur.
- The administrators routinely meet to discuss safety and security related issues, and take action as needed..
- The school district has requested a Risk Vulnerability Assessment to be conducted by the Pennsylvania State Police Risk and Vulnerability Assessment Team (RVAT), Bureau of Criminal Investigation, which is a part of the Governor's Office of Homeland Security.

It is unfortunate that in today's school violence climate, what was once thought of as "kids just being kids" (which is what the situation above would have been construed as at one time) must be treated differently. We must treat all abnormal situations as possible threats to the safety and security of our students and employees. More importantly, we do treat these situations in this manner. Our administration and school board strive to provide the safest and most secure learning environment possible. However, we also learn from every situation. Many are concerned that a communication such as this one was not issued when the incident above originally happened. As a Superintendent, I take pride in keeping open lines of communication, and in issuing alerts to our students and families as situations arise. Each situation is unique, and balance must be maintained. In this era of social media, and, indeed, instant communication, it can be difficult to stay ahead of the rumors. In this instance, we determined that a communication home was not warranted at the time of the event. There will always be many opinions on decisions like this. Please know your voices are heard. Moving forward, we will be mindful of the concerns that this incident sparked, and consider them when making a decision on issuing an alert.

Finally, regardless of whether a notification was sent, or a response is the one that a parent or guardian agrees with, please know that the entire body of employees within the Burgettstown Area School District, as well as the Board of School Directors, takes the health, safety, and well-being of all students seriously. We will never knowingly put a student in harm's way, and will always strive to maintain a safe and secure environment for all.