



February 27, 2020

***Bullying: An Open Letter to Parents and Community Members
from Pitt County Schools***

Pitt County Community,

Pitt County Schools is aware of recent frustration, sadness, anger and other emotions surrounding the issue of bullying. We also feel what our community is feeling. Bullying is a bigger issue than the school system. Because bullying is a community issue, it is crucial for our families, students and concerned community members to join forces with our staff and work together as a team to address this issue. A narrative which places blame, makes false accusations, or relies on hearsay and rumor is not productive. However, we are listening to you, and we care very deeply about your concerns.

Ultimately, our goal is to work *WITH* you to address bullying behavior. We can accomplish this through parent and community education to recognize the signs of bullying and by working with students to teach kindness, resilience and mutual respect. To begin this process, we want to come from a place of understanding. One way we've chosen to do that is by answering the most common questions we've received.

"Why isn't Pitt County Schools doing anything about bullying?"

First, to state that PCS is doing NOTHING about bullying is highly upsetting and insults the integrity of our teachers, bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria workers, school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, school social workers, school administrators, school resource officers and other support staff who love, care for and support children every day. PCS employees, we see you in all that you do, and we thank you for your tireless work in giving hours to children by connecting with them, building relationships, encouraging them, monitoring them, challenging them, providing school supplies, food or other necessities for them, using personal monies to pay fees for them, redirecting them, disciplining them, counseling them, celebrating victories with them, attending off-campus events, laughing and crying with them, and generally selflessly serving our students as priceless and precious fellow human beings. We see you, and we thank you! There are thousands of wonderful

stories that capture all of the actions our staff members take and positively affect the lives of the students they serve.

Second, there is another equally powerful force operating within our schools to combat bullying-- our students. The majority of our over 23,000 students build buddy benches, sign pledges, flood hallways and bulletin boards with affirming messages, stand up for friends, tell adults when there is danger, operate full mentorship and buddy programs, host events to bring awareness, serve those less fortunate, redirect negative behavior, model affirmation instead of aggression, attend tolerance and unifying trainings, stand up as leaders, and serve as peer examples and model human beings. Often, witnessing the passion and courage of these students leaves us in awe, and we are encouraged for the future of our community. PCS students, we see you, and we thank you, and we are motivated to continue the fight against behavior that tears down others instead of building them up. Thank you for your example.

Third, many of our parents and community members, through outside organizations like Parents for Public Schools of Pitt County or school-based teams such as Boosters' Clubs and PTAs, also engage in tremendous support efforts, provide resources, offer mentorships, provide guidance and generally serve our schools in ways we can never fully measure. To our partners-- we also thank you for your positive and tireless example.

Together, we are all doing MANY things to combat bullying. At times, it seems as though we are also fighting an uphill battle. Negative behaviors permeate all areas of society around the clock, and we are exposed through entertainment and social media, at events or at home, in small groups or in large groups, and in public and in private. Individually and collectively, this is not an issue that is isolated to school hours or school buildings.

“So, what is Pitt County Schools actually doing about bullying at school?”

In addition to the daily efforts above, PCS has engaged in many direct efforts to combat the community issue of bullying, teasing, abuse, hurt, name-calling and any other demeaning and aggressive behaviors. (For definitions on any of these behaviors, please access our specific resource www.pitt.k12.nc.us/parentresources or another great resource, www.stopbullying.gov)

The first line of defense for our staff, for parents, and for community members is reporting these behaviors. We can't address what we do not know is happening. We encourage students to report behaviors in several different ways from confiding in a number of safe adults in a school building to reporting through our anonymous tip line. We continuously encourage anyone who SEES something to SAY something. When you hear of bullying, please ask essential and clarifying questions in order to provide the most comprehensive report of any of these behaviors. When bullying *is* reported, we investigate, verify and act accordingly. These actions depend on any individual and substantiated case and include but are not limited to discipline, direct counseling, class or bus changes, mentorship

assignments, reasonable and continued monitoring, and when necessary, referrals to outside agencies, including mental health resources.

A second line of defense includes awareness, education and training efforts. During the last two years alone, PCS has engaged in trainings including but not limited to: Resilience training, Adverse Childhood Experience (ACEs) training, bullying awareness workshops, and other opportunities that directly teach our staff and educate our parents and community to better understand, identify and address unhealthy behaviors. We have developed our own resources, and we have partnered with community agencies to provide parents with vital information and essential tools. These resources are fully accessible to the public on school sites, through the web, and also have been shared on social media. We should note that three of our school-based and district-based events that focused directly on bullying, and were held in the last year, were not well-attended by the community. However, we are continuing to develop new methods and to do our part as a school system to successfully reach students and parents.

“What can’t Pitt County Schools do about bullying?”

It is true that we are limited in our ability to respond and to provide parents or even news media with details about specific incidents. This is not a cover-up, or a “convenient answer” but a legal boundary that we may not cross in order to protect the privacy of our families and to allow families a respectful, private space to process, to heal, to regroup and even to grieve.

We can not eliminate all bad behavior. We can encourage, curb actions, create positive climates, and help to balance the scales in a positive direction for our children. While we have a no tolerance attitude regarding bullying, and our behavior corrections are intended to educate and decrease negative actions, that doesn’t mean we have the power to completely erase bullying, monitor it at every moment, or prevent it from happening. The law requires that we educate all students, even those who engage in bullying behavior. We are called and tasked to do what is best for every student in Pitt County Schools.

“How can parents and the community help to combat bullying?”

It is vitally important that adults do not repeat the same behaviors ourselves. We should not model behaviors that we would not tolerate in our own children. It is important to listen to our children and to serve them. We must also respond as a team instead of as adversaries or enemies. It is important to respectfully and productively manage through proper channels. For our policies and procedures regarding reporting or navigating through the proper chain of command, please visit our website and this resource: www.pitt.k12.nc.us/parentresources Please report community-based bullying to the proper law-enforcement entities or social service providers. Check children’s phones and social media accounts regularly. Encourage productive, meaningful and frequent conversations. Be present.

Families can always reach out to any PCS school counselor or school social worker for resources and referrals. Or, reach out to community agencies who provide good emotional, physical, mental and crisis care. Excellent around-the-clock resources for our community include Crisis Chat at www.integratedfamilyservices.net, Mobile Crisis at 1-866-437-1821 or by simply dialing 211 from any mobile phone or going to www.211.org to access a full clearinghouse of community resources, including immediate crisis help.

Finally, It is important to note that our school board members, our superintendent, our educators and our partner organizations have continued to fight for more funding for mental health services, increased staff such as school counselors, psychologists, and social workers. As mental health issues increase, we will continue to need more staff to serve our children well. Please join us in advocating for additional support.

Thank you for taking the time to join us in creating a productive and positive response to the recent narratives in our communities. We join you in caring for each other and for our children every single day.

