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Recently, we have experienced some threats to student safety. Unfortunately, this is not uncommon throughout the United States and I wanted to provide some understanding to the community about what we do when these events occur and how you can assist us in making our schools safer. While the most recent threats have been confined to the high school, safety at all of our sites is of the utmost importance.

One important fact to consider is every situation is different and must often be treated differently. That being said, we have a standard set of protocols that we employ with regard to keeping our students safe. When information is received, the credibility of that information is assessed. This is usually done by the building principal and often assisted by the School Resource Officer. Depending on the severity of the information, central office administration and additional law enforcement may become involved. A collaborative effort is then employed about what steps come next which could involve different levels of building security or a simple investigation of the situation. The chief consideration is at all times the safety of students and staff. When the assessment is complete and appropriate action is taken, then we gather as much information as possible about the continued risk. When we have examined the information and have a solution to provide continued safety for students and staff, we assess the need for communication with those directly involved. This ranges from discussions with only affected students all the way to a press release and automated call to parents of the building affected by the incident.

The recent events at the high school have caused a few individuals to question through social media why they weren't informed sooner or why more information wasn't provided by the school district. The recent events were followed by several forms of communication. In January, 2013, in this column, I made the following statement, "I will always operate under the following principle: Accuracy is much more important than to be first when communicating important information. From my perspective, I would consider no communication more important than information regarding the safety of our children." In many cases, information desired by the parents involves discipline of another student. Such information is confidential and cannot legally be shared. In other cases, the incident could be part of an ongoing investigation by law enforcement or school district administrators. Preserving the integrity of the investigation will lead to proper punishment by either the school or law enforcement. As you can tell, this process is highly collaborative between law enforcement and the school district. In Guthrie, we enjoy an unmatched working relationship between the entities that assure safety of our children and staff.

The following is an excerpt from a letter I sent to parents in December, 2013: Hopefully, you are asking, “How can I help?” The answer is simple; don’t get caught up in the rumor mill. There is a difference between “someone is threatening” and “John Doe is threatening an act of violence at school.” When someone claims to have knowledge about a threat, we ask them if they have reported that threat to school officials or law enforcement. If they have not, why not? If your student comes home from school telling you that they are concerned about their safety, ask them to be specific about their concern. Don’t accept “someone said” or “I heard”; try to find out who, what, when or where, and if they answer those questions to your satisfaction, call school authorities or the police.

One of the endearing qualities about our community is the small town feel. Many of the people who take an active role in the safety of our students also have children attending our school. It is encouraging that the recent incidents were reported by our students, proving they are taking an active role in providing a secure place to learn. When each parent, grandparent or guardian sends their child to school with us, they are trusting us to care for them as if we were their parents for the time we have them. Some parents recently called school administrators asking if it would be safe to send their child to school. The reply was, “I believe so and my own children will be here as well.” It is one thing to say, “We take it personal,” but with GPS it truly IS personal. That is a distinct advantage of a smaller district and community. This is something I take pride in as I send my own daughter to our schools every day.

GPS is a safer school district than it was in 2012 when we had an incident prompting the communications cited above. We will continue to strive for improvement in providing a safe environment just like we continually strive for success in the classroom and in our extra-curricular activities. While our schools are safer, the following statement from the letter to parents in 2012 highlights a basic principle that hasn’t changed, “You have entrusted us with your most prized possession each day. That is something we will never take lightly.”