

Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Wagner Marseille, delivered the following remarks as part of the May 8, 2017 Community Meeting on Climate and Culture:

I would like to begin by saying that nothing – NOTHING – is more important to me than the safety of our students, our staff, and our community. I hear, loud and clear, your anger over these recent incidents at our school, and as both an administrator and a Cheltenham parent, I share in your anger. Every student has the right to learn in an environment that is free from the threat of violence ... free from intimidation ... and free from distraction. The school board, our district leadership, and I unquestionably and unwaveringly share this commitment. It is our collective duty. At the same time, I am pragmatic enough to realize that there is much work to be done. In the past two months alone, our high school has been home to numerous altercations.

As we all have seen in recent days, this violence has a reverberating impact throughout our community. While countless students continue to thrive and excel -- setting a remarkable example for their classmates – other students are burdened by a climate of unpredictability. In addition, as noted in the recent climate survey you may have read about, 36 of our teachers indicated they do not feel safe walking the hallways. I recognize this is an unacceptable burden on their work.

Since the release of the climate survey, the administration, with the support of our board, has taken a series of steps to address our teacher's concerns, and work toward a safer, more positive environment.

- We have relocated our security manager to the high school full-time, and engaged a high-school climate consultant to review our practices
- We increased supervision and presence in the cafeteria, hallways and other key areas
- We conducted a review of our security deployment plan to ensure it supports the overall improvement of climate
- We implemented a “first ten/last ten” program to reduce hallway traffic
- We expedited the creation of a Sustainable Mentoring Program in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania
- Through Dr. McFall's leadership, we reinforced our school-wide expectations and policies among students.
- And we are working to revise our disciplinary policies to outline clear ramifications for poor conduct.
- And through Dr. Horsey's leadership, we brought on additional on-site social and emotional supports.

In addition, at our April 5 meeting on high school climate and culture, we outlined a series of action steps for the 2017-2018 School Year designed to work toward our goals

- We will restructure our lunch schedules, reducing from a 47 minute to a 30 minute lunch
- We will increase professional learning programs for staff, including a renewed focus on classroom management and de-escalation
- We will design a model for individualized intervention plans for students with academic or behavioral needs
- We will implement a schoolwide positive behavior intervention and supports program
- And we will review staffing needs and evaluate the opportunity for additional positions, with the aim of improving climate and culture

The heart-wrenching and distressing May 3 altercation prompted in us an even more focused response:

- We have ramped up our engagement with our mindfulness consultant, Mr. Alloro, designing programs that center on mindfulness and self-regulation
- We have also enhanced our work in the area of cultural proficiency, as supported by Dr. Barbara Moore-Williams.
- We increased the number of safety officers present on campus, who will be deployed for the remainder of the year.
- Our assistant superintendent, Dr. Smith, has been stationed at the high school to best support the school's administration and to more closely monitor school safety and climate.

Among other things, these steps are designed to limit the risk of teachers having to selflessly put themselves in harm's way. My heart truly goes out to the brave teachers and staff members who intervened on behalf of students during last week's altercation; I owe them – and we all owe them a debt of gratitude.

But these are just some of the many solutions needed to address a multi-layered problem. We also need to change a culture, and culture change is never instantaneous. Just as our hallways did not grow in their instability overnight, we cannot expect to change overnight to a culture free from volatility. Or into one with a more innate sense of respect for one another. Or into one of renewed deference to teachers and adults.

No, this is a process. A process that already is underway. And a process to which I reaffirm my steadfast commitment tonight. A challenge as complex and as nuanced as ours requires a singular focus, creative thinking, discipline. And, as we are seeing, a willingness to persist through shortcomings and setbacks. You've no doubt heard the saying, "a school is a microcosm of a community." Well, this district is committed to an ongoing dialogue with our community. It is essential to our progress.

So in the coming weeks, I will be reaching out to our community to seek the expertise of those who are committed to our climate and culture goals. This work group will comprise members of the community working hand-in-hand with staff, administration and students themselves. Our work together will be action-based and solution-oriented.

This work group will explore complex solutions – such as alternative placement for students facing more severe interpersonal challenges – which we know can have a wide-ranging impact. In addition, this work group will help us in setting measurable goals and evaluating our progress.

We are going to hold ourselves accountable, and we know you will hold us accountable, too. As your Superintendent, I take personal responsibility for the progress of this district.