



For Immediate Release: April 7, 2021 - 5:45 PM

[Video Version of Message](#)

Hello, GAPS Schools Community -

I am speaking to you today to address rumors currently being spread on social media regarding the relationship between our school district and the Albany Police Department. I want to make sure our community has complete and accurate information regarding a complex circumstance rather than the simplistic assumptions on social media.

On March 9th, I was notified by Albany Police Chief Harnden that, due to City of Albany shortfalls and APD staffing challenges, no School Resource Officers (SROs) will be assigned to our schools for the remainder of this school year. We agreed to procedure changes for contacting the police for support when needed at our schools. The Chief wrote, "Sometime in May, we should have a good idea of where our budget stands. If the SRO positions remain in our budget, we will want to talk further about what that may look like and get you all engaged in the selection of new SRO's moving forward." We agreed to this change in our arrangement, as partners do.

Separate from the new SRO arrangement, we have a welcome-back-to-school tradition of the Albany Fire and Police Departments joining us in greeting students as they come back to campus from break. Recently, with the great news that our classrooms have reopened, we held our welcome event tradition once again. Clearly, the intent of everyone who participated in this event was to celebrate the return to school for our kids, and to cheer them on.

However, there are times when our intentions don't match up with how people perceive our actions – and especially when it comes to people in uniform, we are not always able to predict how people will feel. In this case, for some of our students and families, the presence of officers on campus created extra anxiety. After a year of being away from school, this exciting event was experienced with fear and surprise for some students, and does not reflect the trauma-informed approach we strive for in schools. Unfortunately, this turned what should have been a positive and exciting start into something different for these children, and that is not what we want for our students.

When this occurred last week we had many parents express appreciation...but we also had many parents express concerns regarding how their children (and they themselves) felt about seeing police officers on campus. Because we have worked so hard to establish meaningful dialog within our communities, our parents felt empowered to provide a perspective that was previously missing. I appreciate them. Different communities experience the presence of these authority figures differently and all experiences are valid. As a result, we are making only one, but an important,

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substantive change: we are now actively listening to all those experiences and perspectives and considering them in decision-making for this future event. Viewed through this lens, the picture becomes much clearer. Some students are certainly happy to have a sticker and a virtual high five. For some of our kids, the badge is a barrier that makes them uncomfortable walking through our doors.

After Chief Harnden and I were contacted by the first family, I immediately reached out to her to invite a conversation about how we may work together on potential solutions while our Fire Department colleagues continue to welcome students where they are able. In the meantime, we pushed pause on having police officers greet our students on their first day of school so that all students could feel welcome on this important day. This does not reflect our relationship or respect for APD in any way; rather it reflects the needs of ALL of our students to feel welcome and included.

We have learned in recent days that there is some inaccurate information on social media regarding our partnership, and that's why I am taking time to share the full breadth of this situation. We have always had a positive relationship with the Albany Police Department and appreciate all the positive work they do for our community. We also are deeply grateful for all of our parents and their perspectives. We believe that together, both APD and GAPS can model for our community how to repair relationships and build trust. We are hopeful to celebrate with Chief Harnden at our upcoming ribbon cutting ceremonies at SAHS and WAHS, and we look forward to our continued collaboration in the weeks and years to come.

Building bridges,

Melissa

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