SCHENECTADY CITY SCHOOLS

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March 2009

Dear Parents/Guardians:

This letter is to inform you about serious concerns we have regarding recent teen suicides, steps we are taking at Schenectady High School and the important warning signs for parents and other adults.

Schenectady High School has experienced the loss of three students to suicide this year, two in the last two weeks. We also have received several reports of other young students in the community that have also attempted suicide. Needless to say, we are very concerned.

We know that incidences of teen depression and suicide are very real and have affected schools and communities across the country. Parents, teachers and friends are often faced with confusion and questions about this issue, such as “Why didn’t I know?” or “What could I have done to prevent it?” The first step in answering these questions is creating awareness about the issue. Parents sometimes wonder about their own child’s depression or risk.

Please reach out to one of the resources listed below if you see any of the following signs/symptoms in your child: talks about committing suicide; has trouble eating or sleeping; experiences drastic changes in behavior; withdraws from friends and/or social activities or hobbies; loses interest in hobbies, school, personal appearance; gives away prized possessions or appears to be “saying goodbye”; has attempted suicide before; takes unnecessary risks; has had recent severe losses.

At Schenectady High School we have implemented a plan for responding to this tragedy. The plan, evolving from professional experience and the advice of mental health professionals in the community, focuses on ways we can help our students and their families.

We have assembled a team of administrators, counselors, psychologists, teen suicide experts, mental health professionals, and teachers, working hard to help our grieving students and staff members and have taken a number of steps including:

- Continuous availability of counseling staff for students, parents and staff.
- Working closely with outside agencies and community mentors.
- Continued staff, student and parent education regarding suicide prevention.
- Re-start formation of Waveriders Grief/Bereavement Group.
- Planning a community forum for students, parents and staff.

Your child may be affected by these tragedies even if he or she did not know the students well. Not all children will be affected the same. However, we encourage you to talk to your child about what has happened. Discussing thoughts and feelings about death is important toward helping your child work through his or her grief. We, as a district, are balancing our duty of keeping you informed while being cautious not to, in any way, "glamorize" the act of suicide.

As a parent/guardian you may have questions about how to answer the questions and meet the needs of your child during this time. If you feel that your child or family is in need of any additional support or more information, please contact your child's guidance counselor (370-8200) or any of the agencies listed below.

Sincerely,

Gary B. Comley
Associate Superintendent
GBC/aeo

Lynn Rafalik
Director of Pupil Personnel Services

Child Guidance Center
Northeast Parent and Child Society
530 Franklin Street
Schenectady, NY 12304
Phone: 518-381-8911
Contact: Joe Gallagher, Director

Ellis Hospital
1101 Nott Street
Schenectady, NY 12308
Crisis Center
Phone: 518-243-4306
Outpatient Service
243-1300 – Dr. Stephonie

Family and Child Service of Schenectady, Inc. Counseling Program
246 Union St.
Schenectady, NY 12305
Phone: 518-393-1369/ Fax: 518-393-3601
Contact: Maria Sunukjian, Executive Director

Haven Grief Counseling Center
Grieving Children's Program
703 Union St.
Schenectady, NY 12305
Phone: 518-370-1666/ Fax: 518-370-1917

BOCES-CAPIT
School based Masters level social workers and school counselors
in each elementary, middle and high school
Phone: 518-464-3944
Contact: Laura Combs, LCSW, CASAC, CPP