

Greetings,

This past week was one of so many mixed emotions. On the one hand, the weather was lovely and students and staff seemed to be in a really good place. I stopped by a couple of the buildings and again, it's always great to see our students and staff in action. Outside of our school world, there was lots of chatter about the debut, or the second debut of Aaron Rogers and the Jets - sure enough, we all know how that played out. We also had the presidential debate and all I'll say is that I remember a time when presidential debates were somewhat boring; we had to encourage students in social studies classes to watch by offering extra credit. In my true politically neutral role as a public school official, I'm not going to comment. Though I'm sure there is lots people want to talk about. Ultimately we want our students to be critical thinkers and it's incredibly important that we navigate these discussions delicately. The next 52 days are going to be interesting and it's my hope that things stay peaceful with folks engaging in vibrant, but respectful discourse.

Unfortunately we also had to deal with a couple of reports that were alarming. I say alarming not because there was any credibility to the reports, but because on the cusp of the tragic events in Georgia, it really brings the potential of such atrocities to the forefront of our minds. For me, as soon as I receive that initial call, I get a pit in my stomach - what if there is some validity to it? Not just that, even if it's not credible, I wonder how it's going to impact our entire learning community. We already have so many people who feel anxious and unsure and regardless of whether or not threats or reports of guns are valid, it's still impactful. Not to mention the huge toll they have on our resources, including law enforcement who are obligated to take it all seriously. I just can't wrap my head around the idea that after there is an event in a school, there is an uptick in threats made. In fact, Columbine High School still gets threats annually around the anniversary of the tragic events of 1998. I learned this after I dealt with the FBI when two of my former students engaged in this phenomenon. It's simply horrible.

I want to emphasize that we will always take any threat to our safety extremely seriously. Always. And if there is any silver lining to any of this, it's how people come together in response. This was evident at the middle school when numerous staff members volunteered their time to help with bag searches and did so in a positive manner, ensuring that the students were not made to feel anxious about the situation. As I searched bags and sifted through colognes, perfumes, and lots of potato chips, I was encouraged to see the comradery on display. I was

also encouraged to see how much the students cooperated without a fuss. Finally, I was encouraged that nothing of concern was found. Despite the nature of the situation, it was a good morning at Bellport Middle School and I'm very much appreciative of everyone's efforts, including the administrators, teachers, and staff who ensured that the day proceeded smoothly and with a sense of normalcy. Unfortunately, we had a subsequent report made the following day and again I was impressed at the speed at which Bellport High School responded to the situation - not to mention the staff at Frank P. Long who dealt with some of the after effects of the prior day's report. In the end, it really was all good despite the unfortunate nature of what transpired.

Ironically the bag searches were conducted on 9/11 or Patriot Day and it just got me thinking, why does it take tragedy or an unfortunate event to bring people together? Or bring out the best in people? Looking back at my time in the City in the days following 9/11, I remember the spirit of unity and compassion that bound us all at that time. It was an amazing time. I'm sure many of us remember the heroes who rose up and the neighbors who reached out and those countless moments when the ties of family, community and country felt stronger than ever. We should all be reminded of the patriotic pride and resilient American spirit that shone that day and simply carry it forward. I can appreciate why people might feel like we're divided, but I want to challenge everyone into believing that maybe we're not as divided as what's perpetuated. When you look at polls regarding many topics in our country, you'll find that most Americans share the same values no matter what their political beliefs are. If you sit and have conversations with people and get past sound bites and rhetoric, you'll find that we have a lot more in common than we might suspect. In the end, most people are in fact good. Still, there is work to be done.

On Sunday I'll be speaking at the Long Island Parents' Summit in Nassau County. The event is designed to empower parents of high school and college students to counter antisemitism in schools and on campus. I'll be there representing both the Suffolk County School Superintendents Association, in my capacity as the co-chair of their DEI committee, and our beloved South Country Central School District. As a part of a Jewish family and father to kids who have a strong Jewish identity, I feel honored to have been given this opportunity. But it's also another small thing I can do to help foster a world that is free of hate. We can all do little things that contribute to our respective communities. We can listen to one another and even disagree without it spewing into some sort of hate. I really believe that. And perhaps if we continue to operate with kindness as our north star, we can lessen the probability that people

will engage in negativity, like making false reports of threats or perpetuating unfounded rumors or worse yet, engaging in harmful acts.

This weekend I will be filling my cup by engaging in something good that's bigger than me. It's not a huge undertaking because it really is my purpose to spread love and besides, I always keep my cup half full anyway.

Please make the best of the weekend! Enjoy time with family and friends! Be kind and fill your cup!

It really is a privilege serving you as your superintendent of schools.

Tony Santana

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