



LEADERSHIP LENS

Dr. Douglas Hendrix Sr.

Superintendent/CEO of Schools

The Sacred Promise of Coming Home

October 26, 2026

Some memories time refuses to soften. They remain tucked away in places we seldom visit, yet when they return, they bring every face, every sound, and every feeling with them. I have carried one such memory since I was a teenager. It belongs to a young man I once called my friend, and to a younger version of myself who had not yet learned how quickly an ordinary evening could become a lifetime of sorrow.

We were teenagers gathered at a friend's house, laughing, talking, and enjoying the innocence of youth. One of my friends had a nine-millimeter handgun. In our small town, he was known for many things, but that evening he handled the gun as though his intentions could somehow control the danger. He removed the magazine, apparently believing the weapon was empty, unaware that a bullet remained in the chamber. Then, in what he believed was another playful moment, he pointed the gun toward himself and pulled the trigger. In an instant, laughter surrendered to silence, and my friend was gone.

I have spent years remembering that evening, but what troubles me most is everything I never got to see. I wonder what kind of man he might have become. Would he have married, raised children, built a career, or grown old enough for us to laugh about the foolishness of our teenage years? Somewhere in the years he never lived were birthdays, graduations, ordinary Tuesdays, people to love, and dreams he had not yet discovered. His death took more than the life we knew. It took every possibility that life still held.

And I have carried something else. We were all there. We saw the gun. We knew something was wrong, yet the evening continued. I have wondered whether speaking up, leaving the room, or finding an adult might have changed what happened. I cannot know. But I know how deeply I wish we had tried. Losing someone brings a particular sorrow, and another comes from wondering whether your silence allowed danger to remain in the room. That lesson has followed me into every position of responsibility I have held.

Today, when I look into our students' faces, I see my own children. I see young people whose stories are still being written, whose futures contain people they have not met and possibilities they cannot imagine. I want them to grow older. I want them to survive their mistakes, recover from disappointments, discover their purpose, and experience the ordinary blessings of a full life. I want them to have the years my friend never received. And I want every adult in Clayton County to understand that when we protect a child, we are protecting an entire future.

To our young people, I want to speak as I would to my own children. Life will bring moments when your friends encourage you to do something your conscience knows is wrong. Anger may feel stronger than judgment, pride may make walking away seem embarrassing, and the approval of a crowd may appear more important than the consequences of your actions. But some decisions collect their payment long after the applause has ended. A moment of carelessness can leave a family carrying grief for generations. Your life is worth more than a dare, an argument, a fight, a weapon, or somebody else's moment of entertainment.

And when you see a friend moving toward danger, love that friend enough to intervene safely. Tell a trusted adult about threats, weapons, bullying, or a friend who may be considering harming themselves. Move away from weapons and seek help immediately. Don't let loyalty become an excuse for silence. Friendship should never require us to watch someone destroy their future. Sometimes the greatest act of love is the courage to interrupt a moment that might otherwise become irreversible.



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To our parents and families, I understand the extraordinary trust involved in sending a child into the world each morning. Some of you offer a hug at the door. Others call out reminders from the kitchen or watch a yellow bus disappear around the corner. Beneath those familiar routines is a hope that rarely needs to be spoken: you want your child to come home. I ask you to keep conversations about safety alive in your households. Know your children's friends, watch for changes in behavior, secure firearms, and build the kind of trust that lets a child share an uncomfortable truth. Our children need boundaries, but they also need to know that the adults who love them will listen when something is wrong.

To our educators, bus drivers, monitors, school resource officers, counselors, custodians, coaches, and every employee entrusted with our children, never underestimate what you notice. A teacher may recognize that a normally cheerful student has become withdrawn. A driver may hear a troubling conversation. A coach may recognize anger beneath an athlete's silence. A custodian may observe something others overlook. Danger does not always announce itself with an alarm. Sometimes it first appears as a change in behavior, a troubling statement, or a child quietly asking for help. Our responsibility is to recognize those moments and respond.

Safety must live in both our procedures and our relationships. We need functioning equipment, trained personnel, secure buildings, dependable transportation, emergency plans, and adults who understand their responsibilities. But a school can have strong locks and still leave a child feeling unprotected. A student who is bullied, afraid to report a threat, or convinced that nobody will listen is not experiencing the safety we have promised. We must protect children from danger while also creating environments where they feel valued, respected, and confident that someone will respond when they need help.

This responsibility belongs to the entire community. It belongs to the neighbor watching children at a bus stop, the parent reporting a concern, the student refusing to encourage a fight, and the employee following a safety procedure even when it is inconvenient. We cannot afford a culture where everyone notices a problem but assumes someone else will address it. My friend's story reminds me that a room full of people can still become a room full of silence. We must become a community where people look out for one another, take concerns seriously, and never treat another family's child as somebody else's responsibility.

Unity reveals its greatest value when we accept responsibility for people beyond our immediate circles. It is natural to protect our own children, but genuine community requires us to widen that protection. The child sitting beside yours on the bus matters. The student eating lunch alone matters. The young person struggling with anger matters. The child whose family is experiencing hardship matters. Every child deserves the dignity of knowing that the adults around them consider their life precious. We cannot build safe schools by protecting only the children we know or the families we know. Our safety is connected, and we must share our responsibility.

As Superintendent, I recognize that this promise begins with leadership. I cannot ask students to make wise decisions while allowing adults to become careless with the systems intended to protect them. I cannot ask parents to trust us without expecting our employees to be prepared, attentive, and accountable. We cannot promise that nothing bad will ever happen, but we can refuse to become comfortable with preventable danger. We can prepare more carefully, listen more closely, respond more responsibly, and make it unmistakably clear that we will never negotiate safety for convenience, popularity, or silence.

Sometimes I return in my mind to that room where my friend died. I think about how young we were and how certain we felt that there would always be more time. I never imagined I would one day become Superintendent of Schools, carrying his memory into conversations about the lives of thousands of children. I cannot bring him home. I will carry that sorrow. But I can spend the years I have been given helping other children find their way home, and I can ask this entire community to help me.



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Every morning, children leave homes across Clayton County carrying backpacks, instruments, athletic equipment, and sometimes burdens no one else can see. By afternoon, someone looks toward a doorway, listens for footsteps, or waits for a bus to return. Between those two moments are countless decisions made by students, parents, educators, and neighbors. Each decision is an opportunity to protect a life, prevent harm, or show another human being that they matter.

When I say that the children eat first, I am speaking about more than the resources we provide. I am speaking about their right to grow up, their right to feel safe, and their right to experience the years still waiting for them. I want every child who leaves home in the morning to have the opportunity to return to the people who love them. And I want the child beside them to return home too. That is the kind of unity our community deserves, and it is the responsibility we must be willing to share.

I began with a young man whose life ended before he could discover all that it might become. I cannot change his story, but together we can help protect the stories still being written. Let us become a community where courage interrupts danger, compassion refuses to remain silent, and every child knows that somebody is looking out for them. May we never forget that the most important promise we make each morning is also the one families pray we will keep each afternoon: **Make it home, and help somebody else make it home, too.**

Douglas Hendrix Sr., Ed.D.

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