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A difficult week at Lewiston-Porter

BY PAUL J. CASSERI

Lewiston-Porter Superintendent of Schools

Dear Lewiston-Porter School Community:

This has been a difficult week at Lewiston-Porter. Since Monday, we have been working on the disciplinary follow-up of the threatening social media posts made at the Middle School.

We have been collaborating with the Lewiston Police Department on this investigation and, to date, one student has been charged criminally and at least one other student is facing criminal charges in the matter. (A second student has since been charged.)

For other students involved, while they may not have been criminally charged, they are being adjudicated under New State Education Law and our District Code of Conduct. New York State Education Law specifically affords a school district the opportunity to suspend a student permanently from school for the most serious of offenses. Further, New York State Education Law compels a school district to make these decisions based on the adjudicated offense, the students prior disciplinary record and the student's age. Once these matters have been properly heard and all due process rights afforded to the families, the district will

move forward with appropriate outcomes based on the evidence and the process outlined in law. As I have stated, the district takes these incidents very seriously and is working closely with our district legal counsel to address these matters to the greatest extent possible.

Out of this terrible incident we have also learned within the context of this online messaging, that students were also engaged in significant harassing behavior, using highly insensitive, racially motivated language. This is so unfortunate and absolutely unacceptable. Recent social media posts and community member emails indicate that this type of behavior may be a more pervasive problem in our schools.

I have stated clearly, this is not what we are about at Lewiston-Porter. I truly believe that. I truly believe that the vast majority of our families, students and staff are kind, caring people that respect all individuals, regardless of their race, their gender, or their disability. Over and over again, I have witnessed incredible acts of kindness and caring at all levels of our school district. Nevertheless, I would be naive not to realize that racist beliefs or bullying behaviors are non-existent at Lewiston-Porter.

I have been in education for 37

years. I started my career in the City of Buffalo, prior to my arrival at Lewiston-Porter in 2005. Over my career, I have also worked in the Greece School District, Sweet Home Central School District, and Frontier Central School District. Unfortunately, in every district, I have witnessed negative harassing behavior to some degree. Prior to becoming superintendent, in my 11 years as the principal of Lewiston-Porter High School, we worked to continually develop a culture of respect and inclusivity. I know my current administrative team, including the building principals and assistant principals, continually work to foster school communities that value kindness and respect for all. We have added programming and strategies, including the use of outside agencies, to address these concerns. We want our schools to be a lighthouse for our community and for Western New York.

We need to do better! To that end, we need to initiate a deeper conversation within our school community to foster better understanding and healing. We will be offering a Town Hall Meeting on Thursday April 7, at 6 p.m. at the high school auditorium. I hope at this meeting to hear from one or more experts in the field, looking at how we can begin to address this issue more deeply in our dis-

trict. We will also hear from the Lewiston-Porter administrative team as to our current practice for addressing racially harassing or bullying behaviors. Finally, we will offer an open microphone to hear from our community around this difficult issue of racism and bullying in our schools. The goal of the meeting is to listen, inform, and begin a dialogue that will impact the school community in a positive way. We will have more details on the meeting next week.

Finally, to all members of our community, especially our students, if you are experiencing or have experienced racism or bullying at school, please know we are ready to address each and every issue. I am encouraging any parent or student to use the anonymous tip email located on the front page of the district website. You have my pledge that any tip or message will be investigated fully, and appropriate consequences, if necessary, will be applied. We are here to help and support all students and families.

These are difficult conversations. Nevertheless these conversations are important, if we are to create the kind of school district we want for each and every student. I look forward to the meeting on April 7.

Potter's Field dedication ceremony set for July 3

Plans are underway for the Potter's Field dedication ceremony during Lewiston's bicentennial celebration. I am expecting the permanent monument and bench to be placed sometime in May. The Lewiston's Lion's Club is graciously donating a tree to accompany the monument and bench. As spring approaches, I will hopefully be able to continue on with the cleaning and restoration projects I am working on in the cemetery. I have been receiving generous

donations to help me make this project a reality for the community and visitors alike. I am still in need of donations to further the plans I have to beautify the grounds.

The cemetery, being the oldest and a most historical final resting place for some of Lewiston's early and prominent residents, needs to be showcased for its history – both for now and the future. With this project, my goal was to make the grounds a place of solitude for residents and visitors where they

can come to pay respects, sit, rest, and pray for the souls who repose there, or simply to find a moment of peace in their life.

With this in mind, I have been working with various individuals and organizations to hold a remembrance and dedication ceremony to the unknown souls forgotten in history, and pay tribute to their plight in life. The ceremony will be held in the Potter's Field located in the older section of the cemetery behind the

addition to the old stone church. It is scheduled for Sunday, July 3, at 1 o'clock in the afternoon. Everyone is most welcome to attend this event, at which time donors, officials and local organizations will be recognized for their generosity and service to the community.

Looking forward to seeing everyone there.

*Russ Piper
Village Historian/Gatekeeper of
the Marble Orchard*

IN THE NEWS

Day of prayer for Ukraine

St. Paul's Episcopal Church will host a day of prayer for Ukraine from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, March 26, at 400 Ridge St., Lewiston. Prayer will be offered for the victims and refugees of Ukraine. Sample prayers will be provided. The community is welcome to participate anytime during these hours. Bells will be tolled each hour to total the number of children killed.

Niagara County Tribune/Sentinel

Founded February 14, 1987

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Grand Island Publishing Corp.

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The **Tribune** is published weekly.

Display Ads Deadline: MONDAY 5 PM

New York State Press Association,

Niagara County Builders Association,

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Wheatfield Business Association Inc.,

Niagara River Region Chamber of

Commerce, The Niagara USA Chamber.



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