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February 2024

TO: Dr. Ruben Carmona, SHS School Committee

FROM: Alicia Kersten, Principal of Somerville High School

RE: Safety and Security at Somerville High School

CC: SPS School Committee, SHS Students, Staff and Families

As a follow up to our most recent communications about physical fights both on and off campus, this memo provides additional detail about our philosophy and actions we have been taking to address safety at Somerville High School.

Somerville High School is committed to creating a safe environment for all its students and staff. As a district, Somerville Public Schools has demonstrated its commitment to these efforts districtwide by investing in resources and staff - such as school-based social workers in every school, and increasing funding toward social-emotional supports. However, particularly following the global pandemic, SHS has seen an increase in both physical and verbal fights within our school. This is part of an unfortunate national trend among high schools, and while SHS has a number of dedicated policies and programs in place to support our students through difficult situations, we recognize that there is no single, simple solution to the increase in school fights. Our approach is multi-pronged, and includes a focus on building relationships, supporting a sense of belonging for all students, equipping students with tools to solve conflicts peaceably, clear messaging around fights, and support for students who have been or come close to physical conflicts. Of course, we also employ more traditional safety and security measures.

Building Relationships and Supporting a Sense of Belonging

Our number one approach to curbing violence at Somerville High School is building relationships amongst students, and between students and staff members. We want all students to feel supported, and to have a trusted staff member they can go to if they feel unsafe or need help. Moreover, we believe that by fostering these relationships we can prevent escalating incidents *before* they occur.

Somerville High School has embraced the district's initiative to implement principles of "**Restorative Justice.**" Restorative Justice is used as a response to wrongdoing that repairs harm and works to build and strengthen relationships. It can also be used as a proactive tool in relationship building. A key component of Restorative Justice is making



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sure that all students feel like they belong to and are cared for by their community.

There are many ways we build this sense of belonging at SHS:

- Classroom teachers are trained to use specific strategies to build a strong classroom community. Strategies include community-building activities, use of group work, and time for one-on-one check-ins with students.
- “Circles” are a key component of Restorative Justice. At SHS students engage in weekly circles in their X block classes. Through circles students learn a community-building style of communication, and build a stronger bond between themselves and their peers.
- SHS has two social workers who work individually with students who may need more social emotional support, particularly in the area of avoiding peer conflict. These social workers also run small groups with students who share common issues.
- SHS is **increasing opportunities for student leadership and community building** through activities such as pep rallies, a “class olympics,” and student/staff basketball games.
- **Our SHS Community System** (formerly known as “Houses,” i.e. “Beacon House”) gives students easy access to support. Communities consist of an assistant principal, a dean, two school counselors, and an administrative assistant who work closely with students and their parents. If staff have any concerns about a student, they reach out to the community staff, who checks in with the student.

Rigorous, Engaging Classwork

As a community, we're enhancing students' intellectual capacity through a Culturally Responsive approach, fostering meaningful engagement in their academic endeavors. Educators across the school are focusing on rigor and employing techniques that increase student's ability to become independent learners. Cultivating a culture of academic rigor and increasing engagement in classwork, particularly for underserved students, will contribute to a more positive climate at SHS.

Equipping students with the tools to solve conflict peaceably

SHS has a robust mediation program. We employ two full time staff mediators and have 52 trained student peer mediators.

- In a typical year SHS averages around 200 cases referred per school year, approximately 20 cases per month.



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- As of the end of January, SHS has had 161 referrals to Mediation, which is above our typical number for this time of year. Last school year (22-23) we had 105 cases through January.
- Student referrals have made up 30% percent of our cases this year thus far, indicating that many students are embracing mediation as a way to solve conflicts.
- Our data shows that immediately after participating in a mediation, students avoid a physical conflict with the person they mediated with.

Support for students who have been in or close to conflicts

- SHS provides additional support for students who have frequent conflicts - verbal or physical - with their classmates.
- Our two social workers work one-on-one with some students
- Every student who has been suspended has a re-entry meeting with their Assistant Principal, and a “Comeback” meeting with a social workers. These meetings and plans are designed to make sure students can avoid future conflict.

Looking to Students for Solutions

- This spring, our meditation program, in partnership with a program from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Teen Empowerment, is facilitating a student-led research project around “fight culture” at Somerville High School. We are looking forward to the recommendations from this group.

SY24 Physical Altercations - DATA

*Note - This data includes physical altercations involving Somerville High School students. Full Circle, Next Wave, or students from other schools are not tallied in the “number of students” data.

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Total
Total number of physical altercations	10	5	15
Total number of students involved	20	7	27
Altercations that	7	1	8



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took place during the school day			
Altercations that took place after school	3	4	7
Boys	10	3	
Girls	9	3	
Non Binary	1	1	
Students involved in more than one altercation	n/a	n/a	3
Weapons involved	0	0	0

In addition to our efforts to build relationships and provide support to students, SHS also has more traditional security measures in place.

Safety and Security Measures

- **Regular Lock Down and Shelter in Place drills with students and staff.** These drills are done in conjunction with Somerville Police Department (SPD) and Somerville Fire Department (SFD). After each drill there is an immediate assessment by SPD, SFD and school/district administration to evaluate the drill and provide recommendations as needed.
- **Extra support from Somerville Police Department during arrival and dismissal times** as needed.
- **Dedicated School Entry Procedures:** All students must enter through the Main Office entrance doors only. Students must also show their ID when entering. This entry consists of a series of three sets of doors; the first two sets of doors are locked during the school day but are monitored by staff during school opening and dismissal to allow student entrance. Visitors must identify themselves before being allowed access into the building and are required to sign in at the Main Office to obtain a visitor/s badge. These doors are equipped with electronic buzzers to allow entrance and panic buttons that notify the police in case of an emergency.
- **Locked Exterior Doors** (excluding Main Entrance): All exterior doors are locked. **Propping any exterior door open** is a serious safety concern and is strictly prohibited. Students found to prop any exterior door open will be subject to an immediate two-day emergency removal from school pending a



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hearing with their Assistant Principal. Students opening any exterior door and allowing unauthorized visitors or another student to enter is also strictly prohibited. Students violating this school rule will also face an emergency two-day removal from school.

- **Five Community Engagement Specialists (CES)** assist in monitoring the building and doors during the school day. One Specialist is stationed by the main office after school until 6:00 PM. These CES are a constant presence in the hallways during the school day, and are immediately on site to prevent or stop any conflicts that arise. They also develop strong relationships with students, and students often reach out to them for help.
- System of **security cameras** located both inside and outside of the building.
- School administrators and select school staff have **two-way radios that allow for immediate communications**; some of the radios have direct connectivity to SPD and SFD.
- **Shot detector system** The Guardian Active Indoor Shooter Detection System is a “state of the art” safety and security technology protecting both staff and students in the event that a weapon were ever discharged in our high school. This technology can only be triggered by a simultaneous “infra-red blast & acoustic bang” providing a 1 second notification to key school personnel, emergency responders (police and fire) and other critical support staff identified by the Superintendent. Notification to the aforementioned parties includes: text, email and 911. This technology was heralded by the NBC Today Show and noted comments from former Boston Police Commissioner, Ed Davis, touting this as a “game changer technology” that can save lives. The Today Show stated that this leading technology is being introduced throughout the country.
- **Two police call boxes** located outside the building, a third to be placed adjacent to the practice field.
- **Seven panic buttons.** When activated, the Somerville Police are immediately notified and respond to SHS. Two buttons are located in Next Wave/Full Circle, with the other five in areas around SHS
- **25 “Area Refuge Phones”** are placed around the school. These phones connect directly to a security service.
- **State Police Monitoring of Social Media** The Massachusetts State Police monitor social media for any possible threat to a school, and immediately notify local police and school staff if any threat is detected.