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# Kings Park and Smithtown schools chiefs urge discussions at home over sexting issue

November 10, 2015 By JOIE TYRRELL AND VICTOR MANUEL RAMOS  
[joie.tyrrell@newsday.com](mailto:joie.tyrrell@newsday.com), [victor.ramos@newsday.com](mailto:victor.ramos@newsday.com)



Smithtown School Superintendent James Grossane, center, addresses community members during a school board meeting at the Smithtown School Administration building in Smithtown, Nov. 10, 2015, after a growing scandal concerning district students and sexually explicit media. (Credit: Johnny Milano)

student sexting incident involving both districts.

Schools chiefs in Kings Park and Smithtown urged parents or guardians to talk with their children about the dangers of misusing social media as fallout continued Tuesday from a

Kings Park Superintendent Timothy Eagen's impassioned letter, posted on the district's website, came after the sexting incident brought suspensions of about 20 King Park High students for allegedly viewing or possessing images of a 14-year-old boy's sexual encounter with an underage girl.

"This is a shared problem, and more than just an issue of one student, one decision, one suspension," Eagen wrote. ". . . consider having a conversation with your child about their social media and technology use."

The boy in the sexual encounter and another 14-year-old male, students in the neighboring Smithtown district, face charges of promoting a sexual performance by a child and disseminating indecent material to minors, both felonies, as well as third-degree sexual abuse, a misdemeanor. Suffolk County police have said one of the boys had the encounter with the girl, and the other boy recorded it with a cellphone.

Eagen's counterpart in Smithtown, Superintendent James Grossane, asked parents or guardians in a letter on the district's website "to review Internet safety protocols, as well as the importance of being careful with regard to what is shared electronically and online."

Eagen noted that multiple cellphone apps have the purpose of enabling concealment of pictures and videos on mobile devices.

"My goal over the next few months is to work with our principals and parents to get the word out that we need our young people to be good citizens and report problematic behavior to an adult," he wrote, saying he was upset students had not reported misdeeds -- as required by the district's code of conduct.

Monday, Eagen said the district learned of the sexting incident Thursday from an anonymous tip and after students were seen "huddled" around cellphones during lunch.

Similar concerns were expressed in statements on the Smithtown, Hauppauge and Deer Park systems' websites.

Grossane, in his letter, called the allegations "a very serious legal matter that the district does not take lightly."

The two arrested boys are set to appear in Family Court at an unspecified date. They have not been identified because they are minors. The district identified them as being in high school but did not say which of the system's two high schools they attend.

District officials, Grossane wrote, "will be conducting our own investigation to further explore this incident, and students found to be involved may face serious disciplinary consequences for violation of the district's code of conduct."

At last night's Smithtown school board meeting, Grossane read the statement aloud to an audience. He told the crowd of dozens the district held off issuing the statement until Tuesday because "we were waiting until we had as many facts as we could have."

A parent at the meeting, who didn't give her name, called the allegations "disgusting." Robert Foster, an area resident for more than 30 years, said the scandal can serve as an opening for parents and their children to discuss new technology and consequences of its misuse.

"I think we can all go back to that age and remember when we had a very short sight and did not understand the ramifications" of our actions, said Foster, 69. Police said no more arrests are expected, but the investigation is continuing.

Eagen, in a separate statement, said the Kings Park district completed its investigation and did not anticipate more suspensions.

The father of a suspended student said he sent his son to class in protest of the district's action.

"My son didn't forward it. It was part of a group text," said Andrew Fenton, 49, of Fort Salonga. "This is selective prosecution and my son did nothing wrong."

His son, AJ, a 10th-grader, was escorted from the campus by police shortly after 9 a.m.

Andrew Fenton vowed that the "fight was not over."

He said other students who viewed the images, such as members of the football team, were not punished.

Bill Denniston, the district's athletic director, said in a statement, "The school district performed a thorough investigation of this incident and any student, including our athletes, found to be in violation of the district's code of conduct was disciplined."

With Ellen Yan

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