



Written by [Annalisa Pesek](#) on May 24, 2021

## Is School Safety in Jeopardy? WA State Administrators Ignore a Serious Threat to the Student Body

After the horrific mass school shootings of Columbine (1999), Sandy Hook (2012), and Parkland (2018), it's inconceivable to think that school administrators and staff would not urgently address and pursue all threats to school safety in a timely manner to prevent similar atrocities from ever happening again.

Yet in northwestern Washington state, in the charming coastal hamlet of Whidbey Island, a local school district appears to have done just that — ignored a very public threat, later deemed “a joke,” by a high-school senior via a social-media post allegedly directed at the student body.



South Whidbey High School. Photo credit: Annalisa Pesek

The South Whidbey School District, under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. Josephine Moccia, is coming under increased scrutiny from a concerned citizenry for its lack of action involving a troubling message posted on March 14, in which South Whidbey High School senior and ASB class president Isaiah Giffin wrote:

Friendly reminder as we switch to in person at sw [South Whidbey], my pronouns are not he/him, they are they/them so refer to me as such or I will do something to you the [that] ends up on the national news.

Eighteen-year-old Giffin, who was 17 at the time of the post, is an honors student who identifies as nonbinary. Giffin told *The New American* that after coming out as nonbinary last December, when school started in-person this spring, “there were still people misgendering me and I don’t like direct confrontation. I like to use jokes to correct people, because it’s [discussion of gender pronouns] an uncomfortable subject to discuss.”

“I had heard the phrase,” continued Giffin, “I will do something to you that will end up in the national news’ in a joking manner.... I didn’t think it would be taken any other way than a joke. My target audience was students my age, and many knew it was a joke.”

### The Joke’s on Whom?

But many found the message more harmful than humorous. Hours after that first Snapchat went live, Giffin’s mother was contacted by a concerned parent.

“[The post] probably wasn’t the best idea, so I immediately took it down,” confessed Giffin, who later posted this apology on a personal Instagram account:

That last snap was not a threat of violence to anybody, just a joke because I have hard time



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asking for people to do things without making jokes about it. Ending up on the national news could be from any manner of things and was not a threat for bodily harm to any individual or institution.

Too little too late? Outraged members of the community felt the threat was not taken seriously by the district and demanded answers as to why it was not immediately brought to the attention of law enforcement.

At a time when students are [expelled](#) for not wearing a face covering, and when so-called fact-checkers on social media lampooning “hate speech” can close down user accounts permanently, it’s difficult to understand how this incident flew under the radar of Snapchat and the authorities.

A question that must be asked is whether the student was protected owing to being “transgender.”

Similar cases of student threats via social media have escalated since the mid-2000s. For instance, in 2019, a [Snapchat](#) posted by a 15-year-old student in Oakwood, Ohio, in which he suggested he would blow-up the school — as a joke — led police to the student’s house within two hours of the post going live. The Oakwood City School District administrators immediately alerted parents to the incident and ensured them the student who made the threat was not being allowed back on campus.

In the Whidbey case, however, police were not notified immediately, and South Whidbey High School staff and parents were not alerted at all.

According to one parent, “in the past, when there was a [school] threat, I received a text and an email. I received nothing regarding this threat.”

### **Why the Delay?**

Concerned island resident Maureen Greene, whose husband, Damian Greene, serves on the South Whidbey District school board, told *The New American* she was very disturbed by the message and followed up with the local sheriff on Monday, March 15. At that time, Greene was told no report of the threat had been filed.

According to an incident report obtained by *The New American* from the Island County Sheriff’s Office, Sheriff Darren Crownover contacted the school after his conversation with Greene.

Sheriff Crownover was directed by school staff to the voicemail of Vice Principal Paul Lagerstedt, who later returned the call, telling Crownover that “he had been made aware of the incident ... that he had met with school administration and the student that morning and they went through the [threat assessment guide](#) and determined the post was intended as a joke.”

“Based on the school’s protocols,” documented Sheriff Crownover in his report, “Mr. Lagerstedt advised and deemed this event to be a nonthreat and handled the situation internally at the school.”

Fortunately, the incident turned out to be non-violent; however, when questioned about the school’s handling of the threat, Superintendent Moccia was far from transparent. Asked via e-mail by *The New American* for an explanation for the district’s delay in action, Moccia said, “Unfortunately, FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) prevents me from responding to specifics regarding information pertaining to students or situations involving students.”

But upon further inspection of the district’s threat-assessment policies, *The New American* discovered the district was actually in violation of its own rules.

**Rules for Thee, Not for Me**

According to South Whidbey School District Policy No. 4314 for Community Relations:

Students and school employees who are subjects of threats of violence or harm shall be notified of the threats in a timely manner. Parents shall be included in notifications to students who are subjects of threats of violence or harm. If there is a specific and significant threat to the health or safety of a student or other individuals, the district may disclose information from education records to appropriate parties whose knowledge of the information is necessary.

Allegedly no school employees — outside the administration and possibly the school board, though whether the board discussed the issue cannot be confirmed owing to school board confidentiality policies — were ever notified of the threat, neither were students or parents of students.

Pressed further about the district's threat response, according to the threat-assessment criteria, Superintendent Moccia offered this statement:

Our first priority is student and staff safety in every situation. We act immediately. I am not able to give specifics.... The team acted on the threat, assessed the situation and proceeded as outlined in the procedures.

Yet as Sheriff Crownover outlines in his report, the school did not act immediately. Crownover himself informed Lagerstedt of "how fast information is shared and determined it would be a better practice to notify the Sheriff's Office of any like situations in the future, even if they are determined to be a non threat."

Again, the school did not act immediately, as claimed by Superintendent Moccia. Furthermore, Vice Principal Lagerstedt, who was copied on all communications between the school and *The New American*, offered no insight into the incident, though he appears to be the most closely involved in determining the course of the situation.

Giffin noted the school administration classified the post as a Level 1 threat, "which requires disciplinary action, not a suspension or expulsion." This process is consistent with the school-based threat assessment for students, [Policy 3225](#), which further states that "nothing in this policy precludes district personnel from acting immediately to address an imminent threat, including imposing an emergency expulsion, if the district has sufficient cause to believe that the student's presence poses an immediate and continuing danger to other students or school personnel or an immediate and continuing threat of material and substantial disruption of the educational process."

**A Slap on the Wrist**

"In my case," said Giffin, "I was removed from my position of ASB president. Punishment is meant to help [people] understand what they did wrong. It was clear, I understood what I did wrong and made steps to correct my actions.... I never spoke to law enforcement, but they did assign me a counselor. I did not think that for my history and who I am there could have been a worse punishment except for taking away my passion of leadership."

Giffin believes the consequences have been fair. "I was referred to a school counselor.... They helped



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provide me with support systems. I am not an emotionally unstable individual.... There was no malicious intent, I have never harmed anyone. There was no motivation [other than] to remind people of my proper pronouns. It's challenging, and people aren't necessarily receptive with that."

"[At school everything is] completely fine. [It's been] dropped completely.... I have been promoting transgender education. [I realize that] threatening someone, even in a joking way is not a good way to get your point across."

Giffin has since resigned as ASB president, and in an official statement to the student body via an Instagram post wrote:

At the time [of the original post] I was so focused on the idea that it was a joke that I failed to look at it from a different angle. Considering our current political climate and social environment, my post, no matter the intentions, was inappropriate, immature, and in very very poor taste. Although I can assure that there was never once a real threat of bodily harm or violence to myself or others, my actions were inexcusable.

### **Community Action**

Since 2020, more than 55 students have left the South Whidbey School District. Parents are pulling their children out for any number of reasons, including health classes that focus on "gender phobias," teaching kids as young as 11 to question their gender and how to use sex toys such as dildos.

Moreover, parents are weary and critical of the political activism revolutionizing basic academics. And many are turning to homeschooling.

One South Whidbey parent, speaking on behalf of hundreds of parents, expressed indignation to the administration for its decision to display a gigantic Black Lives Matter (BLM) banner at the entrance to the high school. The sign seems to accentuate the school's support of the Marxist organization, sending a clear message of approval of BLM's violent, revolutionary ideals. Despite the parent's complaint, the school district appears to have dismissed the concern, and it doesn't look like the sign will be removed anytime soon.

While this particular case was brought to the attention of *The New American*, the likelihood of similar cases happening across the nation is highly probable. Concerned citizens such as Greene, as well as proactive parents, can step up their understanding of what's happening in the schools by getting involved in their local government politics and running for positions on their local school boards. All voices matter.

The hope in bringing this incident to light is that it will help Americans across the nation be more vigilant in holding their district administrators and school boards accountable, not only to follow their own rules but to pursue each and every threat with urgency and immediacy.



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