



## ELMORE COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION

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100 H.H. Robison  
P.O. Box 817  
Wetumpka, AL 36092

Phone: 334-567-1200  
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Richard E. Dennis, Superintendent  
Jason M. Mann, CSFO

May 15, 2024

Dear Mr. Line:

Please allow this letter to acknowledge as receipt of your correspondence dated May 3, 2024, and to serve as my response. In the past year, Stanhope Elmore High School has experienced extreme grief by losing two students to suicide. With the hope of avoiding future tragedies of this nature, the school has taken considerable measures making mental health education a priority. Mental health promotion and prevention interventions aim to strengthen our students' capacity to regulate strong emotions, enhance alternatives to risk-taking behaviors, manage difficult situations, and promote healthy social environments at school, home, and in our community. In continuance of the school's effort towards mental health awareness, Mr. John Eklund was invited by the school administration to speak at a recent student assembly on the topic of overcoming adversity and anxiety. As you are probably aware, Mr. Eklund is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and regularly works as a therapist for teenagers.

Student support assemblies of this nature are optional for attendance and voluntary for participation. With respect to the event featuring Mr. Eklund as a speaker, the assembly was not mandatory for the students. The students who attended were not coerced to attend and had the option not to participate. After conferring with the staff at the school, only one student asked to sit elsewhere during the assembly, and that student was allowed to do so. No other student requested not to attend or voiced any concern about Mr. Eklund's presentation.

***Every student empowered. Every student succeeds.***

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Second, the assembly was not a “religious assembly.” As stated before, the purpose of the assembly was to provide students with tools and information to deal with overcoming anxiety and emotional difficulties. The crux of Mr. Eklund’s address was to encourage students to seek help and therapy for any mental issues that they may experience, not religion. Based on feedback from the school, the mental health content appeared to be well received by most of the students who attended the program.

Following the assembly, the administration received one student complaint, indicating that the student did not know attendance was optional. After receiving notice of this concern, the school administration investigated it and has taken measures to prevent any similar concern in the future. The District recently held a principals’ meeting highlighting the importance of the First Amendment and ensuring the appearance of the district’s endorsement of religion in our program is strictly avoided. The school faculty and staff will continue to be reminded of students’ rights and we are also committed to on-going efforts to advertise student support events and assemblies as optional and voluntary in nature.

My administration will continue to review the District’s programs and practices annually to ensure compliance with Constitutional and federal requirements. Thank you for your interest in Elmore County Schools.

Sincerely,

Richard E. Dennis, Superintendent

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