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PRICE 50 CENTS

Parents slam schools that don't warn them of threats

By Martha Waggoner

RALEIGH (AP) - When officials at a Catholic high school in South Carolina learned that a 16-year-old student made videos of himself firing a gun and using racial slurs, they alerted police, but not parents. After the videos made it into the news over the summer, the backlash came quickly.

Outraged parents complained they were left in the dark about the teen's threat to shoot people at Cardinal Newman School while their children were at risk. The principal took more than two weeks to send letters to parents about the videos and later apologized for not sharing information sooner.

While schools are more vigilant than ever about threats or signs of potential violence, some have faced intense criticism for favoring privacy over informing the community. When trying to strike a balance, security experts say there's one rule: Tell parents as much as you can as soon as you can.

"Every school district has to determine what kind of news conference they want to have," said Ronald Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center in California. "Do they want to have one where they say 'Oh, yeah, we knew we had Charlie Manson Jr. walking the halls and we did nothing about it.' Or do they want to have the other one where they say, 'We informed the parents and students'" and diffused the situation.

Some school districts are now sending letters home even if a threat isn't specific or to warn what consequences children face if they make a threat.

Parents got more concerned about what schools tell them about security threats after details emerged about a shooter who killed nine people last month in an Ohio entertainment district.

The 24-year-old gunman had been suspended from his high school years before the shooting for compiling a "hit list" of fellow students, former classmates say. Police told at least some of his classmates that they were on the list, but it's not clear what information the school shared widely at the time.

The suburban Dayton school district has refused to release information about Connor Betts, who was shot and killed by police, citing legal protections for student records. News organizations, including The Associated Press, CNN, The New York Times and others, have sued for access to Betts' high school files.

Schools can seem less transparent than police, who are legally allowed to reveal more information, and administrators can struggle to stay ahead of rumors as students quickly post on social media.

Schools can't release children's names, but those that don't communicate at all can face parent revolts when details come out later.

In Ohio's Highland Local Schools, where some staffers can carry concealed weapons, angry parents told the school board that they should have been told when a first-grader picked up a loaded handgun left unattended by an employee in March. Instead, they learned about it in August in The Columbus Dispatch newspaper.

School board president Wayne Hinkle said officials could have communicated better with parents.

"I'm still working on what should have and could have and what- ever," he said. "Heaven forbid this ever happens again. If it does, I do believe the school will be better equipped to handle it."

At the Catholic school in South Carolina, officials learned of the threatening videos, which the student forwarded in a group text, on July 13. They called police and told his parents he would be expelled.

He was arrested on July 17 when another video surfaced in which he threatened to shoot people at the private school in the state's capital, authorities said. He was charged as a juvenile with making student threats.

The first two videos show the white teen firing more than two dozen shots into a box that he says represents black men, authorities said. He uses a racial slur several times in the videos and says African Americans "are bad people."

The State newspaper in Columbia published an article on the videos July 30. In a series of letters to parents days later, principal Robert Loia said the threat had been addressed and school leaders did not think anybody was in danger.

He faced intense criticism from parents before apologizing in a letter Aug. 5.

"I realize now that I should have communicated with you immediately when I learned a violent threat had been made against our school community," Loia wrote.

A spokeswoman for the Diocese of Charleston, which covers the Columbia school, didn't respond to messages asking if the school or diocese wanted to discuss how the parents were notified.

"Any kind of threat to the children, every parent should know and continue to be kept abreast of what's happening," said Greg Pryor, a parent who attended a meeting with administrators on the issue.

Other schools have sent letters to parents even in cases where officials determined there wasn't a credible threat.

The Ravena Coeymans Selkirk Central School District outside Albany, New York, sent a letter to parents in November about a "non-specific, verbal bomb threat" even though they had determined the student was just blowing off steam.

The school and law enforcement responded that way because this is an "era where there is no such thing as an innocuous threat," Superintendent Brian Bailey said.

Schools in Kentucky also are now sending letters to parents outlining what happens if their child makes a threat. The letters, required in a law passed this year in response to a 2018 shooting that killed two students at Marshall County High School, say schools will pursue charges when a student makes a threat that could result in death or injury.

"We're done with it," said William Boblett, superintendent of Boyd County schools in eastern Kentucky. "We're tired of dealing with this."



St. Joseph A.M.E. Church held its first NCCU Sunday, a quarterly program, to support North Carolina Central University with a donation from the church. While the local emphasis was for North Carolina Central University, the theme is to support all Historically Black Colleges and University. On hand, from left to right, are Dr. Tyrone Baines, retired NCCU official; Dr. Johnson O. Akinleye, NCCU chancellor; Rev. Jonathan C. Augustine, senior pastor; and, Kevin M. Holloway, Chair, Board of Trustees of NCCU.

Saving the lives of black babies is the goal of NC effort

By Lynn Bonner
The News & Observer

RALEIGH (AP) - Black babies in Wake County are six times more likely to die before they reach their first birthday than white babies.

The higher death rate for black babies is a statewide problem, but the gap between black and white babies' survival was wider in Wake in 2017 than it was in North Carolina overall. Statewide, black babies were 2 1/2 times more likely to die before turning one-year-old.

To tackle the problem in Wake, the county is trying an approach in that focuses on improving community health. Wake County is creating something called a Best Babies Zone in southeast Raleigh, which has some of the county's highest rates of African American baby deaths.

According to Wake's application, African American babies born in the county are more likely to be born prematurely and at a low, unhealthy weight. African Americans are more than twice as likely to lack health insurance, according to the application.

Wake will establish its Best Babies Zone in an area with about 18,250 residents. More than 70% of residents there are African American, and an average of 240 babies are born there each year.

Median household income in southeast Raleigh is less than half the median income in Wake as a whole, and residents are more likely to spend more than 30% of their income on housing, the application says.

The team initiating the effort includes representatives from the Crosby Garfield Center, the Southeast Raleigh YMCA, the community organization Southeast Raleigh Promise, Wake human services department staff, as well as two local residents, and County Commissioners Chairwoman Jessica Holmes.

Addressing infant mortality is a goal for the Board of Commissioners, Holmes said in an email.

"I appreciate that the Best Baby Zone approach focuses on empowering the community through health equity," she wrote. "A person's zip code should not determine whether or how long they will live. We cannot address infant mortality in a vacuum, we must also account for social determinants of health. By finding solutions to improve social and economic factors impacting our most vulnerable communities, we will consequently start to bridge the infant mortality gap."

The team doesn't start with a playbook, said Dorothy Cilenti, an interim public health division director for Wake. "It's not a specific program," she said in an interview. "It's making these long-term structural changes to improve the overall quality of life that is important for healthy pregnancies."

Having people who live in the community decide what it needs is key to the Best Babies Zone approach.

"That's a core part of it - community-based decision making," said Denise Pecha, director of programs at City-MatCH, the organization based at the University of Nebraska that oversees the initiative.

"People know where the disparities are. They know where the opportunities are," she said.

The first baby zone efforts launched in 2012 in Oakland, Calif., New Orleans, and Cincinnati with a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, according to the organization. More communities followed, and the foundation continues to support the initiative.

Baby zone teams from around the country meet once a year to talk about ideas, and they get help over three years to carry out their community plans.

Neighborhoods that are part of the initiative consider the role of racism in black infant deaths and work to address the root causes of infant mortality, Pecha said.

"It's not by accident there are disparities in birth outcomes," she said.

African-American jobless rate hit record low in August

By The Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) - The unemployment rate for black Americans fell sharply to 5.5% in August, hitting its lowest level since record-keeping began in 1972. But the drop was driven primarily by a negative development: Fewer African-Americans were either working or seeking jobs.

The government counts people as unemployed only if they are actively looking for a job. When fewer people seek jobs, the unemployment rate often declines.

The unemployment rate for Americans of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, which can include all races, also fell but in this case for positive reasons. More of these people came off the sidelines and found jobs, lowering the jobless rate to 4.2% from 4.5% in July.

The Labor Department said Friday that all told, employers added a modest 130,000 jobs in August. The overall unemployment rate held steady at 3.7%.

The data for demographic groups came from a survey of households that is part of the Labor Department's monthly jobs report.