

Akron Beacon Journal

EDUCATION

Akron Public Schools superintendent rebuts teachers' safety claims in letter to parents



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Published 1:29 p.m. ET Nov. 23, 2022 | Updated 2:14 p.m. ET Nov. 23, 2022

The superintendent of Akron Public Schools outlined the district's efforts on student discipline and school safety in the midst of contract negotiations with its educators, who have said the schools "are not safe."

In an email to district parents and caregivers Tuesday evening, Superintendent Christine Fowler Mack said coverage published in the Akron Beacon Journal "failed to capture the many ways APS has made the safety of students, and staff a top priority this year" and was "an unfair misrepresentation of our schools and painted all our students with a broad brush."

"With this letter, I want to reaffirm the district's unwavering commitment to school safety, set the record straight, and provide details about what we are doing to keep our students and our staff safe," she said.

The Beacon Journal has repeatedly requested additional comments from the district beyond information shared at school board meetings and brief statements from APS about discipline and school safety. Fowler Mack has declined multiple interview requests.

What safety measures are Akron Public Schools taking to protect students, teachers?

Fowler Mack said new school safety measures have been implemented this year, including door alarms, adjustments of traffic flow and staggered bell schedules to reduce the number of students in the hallways; increased use of metal detectors; and random safety checks.

Fowler Mack also said there are student resource officers in all middle and high schools, with additional security and law enforcement "during times of heightened activity or concern," as

well as 50 full-time and 13 part-time safety team members.

Akron Education Association: Akron teachers reject recommendations for new labor contract, say 'schools are not safe'

A districtwide safety committee meets quarterly to provide insight and recommendations for further safety measures in the school district, and there's ongoing safety training for district staff, she said.

The Akron Board of Education hired administrative staff to specifically oversee student behavior intervention and response, security technology and equipment and safety personnel. School-based staff also work to set and reinforce expectations and positive behavior among students, she said.

Fowler Mack said there are routine audits of all buildings to ensure safety protocols are being followed, cameras are functioning and doors are properly locked.

The superintendent said that "any suggestion that school officials do not respond quickly and appropriately to the misbehavior of students" isn't true.

"The safety of our staff and our students is foremost in every situation where discipline or removal of a student is warranted," Fowler Mack said.

She also said the district uses positive intervention and restorative rather than punitive actions, with a school-based behavioral health program and K-12 social-emotional learning curriculum.

Skills the district focuses on include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship building and responsible decision-making, with school-based family liaisons connecting families to school and community resources as needed.

"Whenever possible, our goal is to redirect students toward positive choices and to do everything we can to keep them in our schools, where their greatest hope for the future resides," she said.

Akron Board of Education: Akron school board members optimistic district can reach new contract with teachers

Fowler Mack said the district's application of student discipline "is balanced with the empathy and compassion needed to redirect student behavior whenever possible," including avoiding excessively punitive measures that "shirk our responsibility to do what is best for

everyone, including our students who struggle with the issues that can lead to unacceptable behavior.”

“Regrettably, APS teachers and staff face the same challenges that other urban districts face, when the inappropriate actions of the few cause disruptions to the learning environment of the many,” she wrote. “However, APS is proactively meeting those challenges by putting time, attention, and resources into addressing and curtailing behaviors that are unacceptable in our schools.”

How APS students are involved in ensuring safety at school

Fowler Mack said along with equipment and staff working to ensure student safety, the students themselves also play a part, with the district meeting with student leadership groups “to gather input and empower student leaders to recognize and address student behavior issues before they manifest themselves in disruption.” “These student leaders are equipped to employ skills and strategies proven to help students hold themselves and their peers accountable for good behavior at school,” she said.

Fowler Mack also said families play a role in keeping students safe, calling school safety “a shared responsibility.”

She said families should tell staff any concerns about their children’s behavior and emotional well-being and reinforce their own expectations for positive behavior at home and in school with their children.

“The challenges we face, in our schools and in society, provide opportunities for all of us to model for children the problem-solving, flexibility, and compassion needed to make Akron Public Schools and our community the safe and nurturing environments our staff, students and families need and deserve,” she wrote.

Akron school suspensions: Akron more aggressively suspends students than most Ohio urban districts, data shows

