MCPS **MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**
www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org
MARYLAND

Malcolm Baldrige
National Quality Award
2010 Award Recipient

December 13, 2013

Dear Parents,

Since becoming superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools, I have spoken at length about the importance of social emotional learning—essentially, giving our students the skills they need to navigate their lives in a healthy, positive way. And that is why I am writing to you today.

This week, the wintry weather required us to go through our normal processes to determine whether we should delay or cancel school. It's not an easy decision and involves staff working at all hours to monitor road conditions and weather forecasts. As we were in the process of evaluating the situation, students started contacting me on Twitter. Some of these "tweets" were clever, funny, and respectful, pleading for me to cancel school so they could sleep in or have more time to do their homework. Many of these tweets, however, were offensive and disturbing. Some were threatening to me and others. A few referenced my family. There was rampant use of racial epithets and curse words.

This activity on social media caused me to reflect on my responsibilities as a parent of three children and the superintendent for 151,000 children, and what our role is in ensuring that our children are using technology appropriately. This is especially important as we increase the use of technology in our schools, including full wireless access and bring-your-own-device possibilities for our students.

As superintendent, I have the legal responsibility of *in loco parentis*, meaning that I and other educators are supposed to serve as "parents" in the school building. Some of the tweets I received were so disturbing that my staff reported them to the school principal and our security team. This may seem like an overreaction to some, but it is our legal responsibility to do so, and we take it very seriously.

But this is more than just a challenge at the office. My wife and I find ourselves in a daily conversation with our children about the appropriate use of technology. How long can they use a device? How often during a day? What are they allowed, and not allowed, to take pictures of? They don't have internet access yet, but I am already imagining what it will be like when they do. How will my wife and I ensure that they are being safe online, while allowing them to access the many positive aspects of the online world and social media? How will we ensure we have the right controls and oversight so they are doing so in an appropriate way?

I don't have all the answers in my home or in our schools. But I know it takes deliberate and tough conversations within families and communities to help kids understand how to use technology and social media appropriately.

I'm sure that most of the students who posted inappropriate comments to me on Twitter were doing so without thinking. In fact, we know that the adolescent brain isn't equipped to think long term and doesn't calculate risk/reward ratios in the same way that adults do. I'd like to think that they wouldn't post such things if they understood the consequences of their actions or if they knew that I'm legally responsible for reporting threats to the police and to their parents. I'd like to think they wouldn't post such things, especially if they understood that these posts are permanent and can follow them and impact college acceptances, job opportunities, and future relationships.

I'm writing this letter to start a conversation about how we can support our children in using technology in a way that is healthy, productive, and positive. Cyberbullying is a real issue among children and adults. We not only have to teach our kids how to handle new technologies appropriately, but we also have to model that behavior in our own communications on social media and email. We need to talk about "cybercivility:" how we can help our children grow into responsible and caring adults who interact with one another in a civil, respectful way. I have asked my staff to develop some materials and methods to help schools and families navigate these conversations, so look for more information about this in the near future.

In the meantime, I urge you to talk to your children on an ongoing basis about what's appropriate and not appropriate to do online. Also, remember, if your child is under 13, do not allow them to use social media—they aren't ready for it and it is a violation of the user agreements or guidelines for nearly all major social media sites. If your child is 13 or older, please consider whether they are ready to use social media. Set limits and talk to them about the appropriate use of social media and mobile technology. And make sure you are monitoring what they post online.

Our website—www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org—has some resources that you can use to talk to your children now and we will be adding more resources in the near future. If you have any thoughts or ideas to help further this cybercivility dialogue, please do not hesitate to email me at Joshua_Starr@mcpsmd.org or contact me on Twitter at @mcpssuper.

Sincerely,

Joshua P. Starr, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

JPS:sln

Visit the MCPS Cybercivility website at
www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/cybercivility/