

STILLWATER PUBLIC SCHOOLS PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Response to OSDE 10/26 Board Meeting Comments

(Stillwater, Oklahoma, October 26, 2023) Today, Oklahoma State Superintendent Ryan Walters criticized an email message that Superintendent Gordon sent earlier this week to district parents, guardians, and district staff, stating that it appears to be an “attempt to circumvent” the OSDE’s “rules around notifying parents about behavior going on with their children.” In his comments he said the email appeared to “slam parents” and “undermine parents.”

We’re somewhat confused as to how the message was interpreted in that way.

Any time a significant change occurs regarding district practices, we strive to communicate such changes to parents and guardians. The recent OSDE rules referenced in the message are resulting in such significant changes. This message was sent to:

- Provide transparent information to families about the OSDE rules and our practice changes
- Explain who would communicate with parents/guardians and that documentation of those communications would occur
- Remind families of confidentiality changes that occur with legal adulthood for students over the age 18 as defined by federal law
- Empower parents and guardians with resources to navigate complex issues themselves

The message links directly to the OSDE rules and indicates the district’s intention to comply with those rules. Further, as the rules include the statement:

“A School district shall disclose to a child’s Parent(s) or guardian(s) **any information** known to the School district or its employees regarding material changes reasonably **expected to be important to Parent(s)** regarding their child’s health, social, or psychological development, including Identity information,”

The message sought to clearly communicate a few examples of what the district considers that statement to include.

Knowing these new rules have been met with some concern by citizens worried it would lead to schools “outing” students, or releasing other sensitive information to parents that may not be receptive to such information, we included a statement about student safety in such situations. That portion of the letter is in no way a criticism of parents or any reasonable parenting styles.

According to CDC reports, 1 in 7 children experience neglect and abuse. Oklahoma Human Services conducted 35,456 investigations of child abuse or neglect, with 575 of those occurring in Payne County, during FY 2021 (the most recent easily available report we could locate). Sadly, as all schools are all too aware, and as data shows, many children are not supported at home.

While that message was not sent to nor intended for students, we realize there’s always a significant chance some parents/guardians might share it with their children, and it may circulate amongst students. We wanted any student who might see that message and who is in an unsafe environment to know that, while we are prohibited by the new rules (again, with which we fully intend to comply) from keeping their information private from their parents, we can connect them with resources for their safety. Student safety and well being is always our primary concern.

We intend to comply with OSDE rules, to communicate with parents, and to keep students safe. We are disappointed that this message was not clear enough in those regards, and regret that anyone could interpret this letter as anything other than a statement of care and concern.

The entirety of that email follows.

SPS Staff and Families,

This message is to provide you with clear information following recent Oklahoma State Department of Education’s policy changes, particularly an [emergency rule](#) and changes to [administrative rules](#). A few points for clarity (though not all of the items below are new):

- School districts are not able to change sex/gender designation in student records without authorization from the State Board of Education. Families wishing to do so will have to go through a process with that entity.

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- In the event a student expresses to a school staff member information that is “reasonably expected to be important to Parents,” that information will be conveyed to the parents/guardians by the site principal and that communication will be documented in student records. Such information may include:
 - A desire to become sexually active or becoming sexually active
 - Interest in homosexuality or another non-heterosexual orientation
 - Thoughts of transitioning to a gender other than that indicated on the child’s birth certificate
 - Requests to change pronouns
 - Pregnancy
 - Reporting a sexually transmitted infection or symptoms consistent with an STI
 - Expressing thoughts or evidence of self-harm or violence to others
 - Anxiety and stress beyond typical levels
 - Use of or evidence of use of prohibited substances
 - Or other significant information

We value strong partnerships with families, and our staff is happy to engage in productive communication with parents/guardians that provide loving support to their children and to connect them to resources to help navigate complex issues. Sadly, sometimes parents, guardians, or other family members may react negatively, and in the worst cases, violently, to learning unexpected information about a child. Students will be told that such information must be shared with their parents/guardians. If a student expresses that sharing such information might create an unsafe environment for them, our counselors will work towards protecting that child’s physical safety, and may contact organizations that help families work through sensitive matters constructively.

For students who have reached the age of 18 years and are considered legal adults, conversations with staff will be treated confidentially, in accordance with federal law.

Additionally, I’ll take this opportunity to promote our Student Support page available at www.stillwaterschools.com/studentssupport. This section of our site provides contact information for district wide and school site counselors, links to SPS Counseling, Health Services and Family Support Services sites, and a recently started resource library. It also includes a collection of other Stillwater area counseling resources, which can help students with specific counseling needs or who are more comfortable contacting providers outside of SPS.

If you have any questions about this matter, please reach out to your child’s principal.

Thank you,

Uwe Gordon
Superintendent
Stillwater Public Schools

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