

April 25, 2017

Joseph Amaral, Principal
Portsmouth High School
120 Education Lane
Portsmouth, RI 02871

(by fax and mail)

Dear Mr. Amaral:

Our office has been contacted by some parents after receiving an email that you sent them this past Friday in which you indicate that “fully trained K-9 units will be used to do periodic searches” of the school “to make sure that marijuana/or controlled substances are not present on campus.” I am writing to express our organization’s deep concerns about this plan and to urge that you reverse any such collaboration with police.

The use of drug-sniffing dogs in the school setting is extremely troubling for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it treats students like criminal suspects instead of as teenagers who should be learning the value of human rights.

While you cite the “proliferation of illegal substances” among young people, we are not aware of any data that confirms such a proliferation, particularly while at school. In any event, as adults we would be appalled if our employer brought in drug-sniffing dogs because drug use was said to be “proliferating” among adults. It is no more appropriate to do it to captive teenagers in the school setting.

As you are undoubtedly aware, one day just last month, K-9 searches were conducted at Middletown High School as part of a “training exercise.” As is almost always the case with these types of “exercises,” no drugs were found in the school. Since your plan does not appear to be prompted by any actual reports of widespread illicit drug activity at the school either, it remains abundantly clear that these searches are not really about rooting out drug problems; they are just blatant displays of raw police power and intimidation.

The use of police dogs in schools casts a pall over the entire educational experience and the values that schools should be instilling in students. As U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens once noted: “The schoolroom is the first opportunity most citizens have to experience the power of government. . . .The values they learn there, they take with them in life. One of our most cherished ideals is the one contained in the Fourth Amendment: that the government may not intrude on the personal privacy of its citizens without compelling circumstances.” In our view, the intrusion on privacy and dignity incurred with the use of drug-sniffing dogs in school, and its negative effect on the basic values of an educational system, cannot be understated.

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We recognize that some parents may applaud this plan as simply a necessary evil to ensure a drug-free school environment. But when schools begin treating the entire student body as potential law violators instead of as pupils, they have inflicted damage on their educational mission in ways much greater than a few marijuana-possessing students ever could.

The rest of your email to parents notes the many positive and productive ways that your school is attempting to deal with the serious problem of drug abuse. We applaud those other activities, but we firmly believe that the use of police dogs and scare tactics undermines, rather than aids, those efforts.

We therefore strongly urge you to reconsider your plans to have random police dog searches conducted at the school. Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

Steven Brown
Executive Director

cc: Supt. Ana Riley
Portsmouth School Committee