



# REASONS WHY' to Take Action

A Netflix series on teen suicide sparks concerns about student safety

*Glenn Cook*

**A**bout a year and a half ago, Steven Kellner received an inquiry from Paramount Television about filming a show at one of his schools. Officials with California's West Sonoma County High School District knew the source material — a popular young adult novel — and were intrigued by the opportunities for students during the filming.

"It was a positive experience for us," says Kellner, the district's superintendent. "We were familiar with the book, and we worked with them to really involve

students in the project."

Twelve students from the district's video production program served as interns on the show, and many of their classmates worked as extras during the filming, which took place last fall. The book's author, Jay Asher, met with all of the district's ninth-grade English classes to discuss the novel's themes before the show was released on Netflix.

Within weeks following its March 31 release, "13 Reasons Why" had become a phenomenon. The show, which depicts the suicide of a teenage girl and the tapes

she leaves behind, was tweeted about more than 11 million times in just a month, becoming the most discussed TV show on the platform in the past year. Traditional news media latched on to the show's controversial subject matter and content, which included instances of bullying, self-harm, and sexual assault, leading to an additional 2 million mentions within six weeks.

Caught off guard by the show's rapid entrance into the cultural zeitgeist, especially among teens, school officials scrambled in late April and May to respond. Letters with local and national resources on suicide prevention were sent to parents, and at least two districts temporarily pulled Asher's book from school libraries. Warnings about the show's content were added to each episode as suicide prevention experts, school counselors and school psychologists warned about the possibility of copycats.

Christine Moutier, chief medical officer of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, says the show presents a host of mixed messages for youth and families. She strongly advises people who have been traumatized, are vulnerable, or are at risk for self-harm not to watch the series.

"Every time we raise the topic of suicide, we must pair it with a message of prevention and hope," Moutier says. "Never use the word 'epidemic.' Never talk about escalation. Talk about what the data shows, that it is a tragic and preventable cause of death but is actually not escalating, particularly among youth, thankfully."

## RED LIGHTS FLASHING

For school leaders, shows like "13 Reasons Why" represent both a potential threat to student safety and a teachable moment for staff, youth, families, and the community at large.

In the final episode of season 1, the lead character, Hannah, takes "one last chance" and visits her school counselor with disastrous results. She tries to tell the counselor about her feelings; a sexual assault that occurred in a previous episode is alluded to, but no action is taken. She leaves without the counselor calling her parents or asking other administrators for help.

Carolyn Stone, a University of North Florida professor and author of *School Counseling Principles: Ethics & Law*, lists at least 30 poor decisions made by the counselor during the extended scene. Each should have "triggered a sense of urgency and an emergency

response," she says, but he fails to act on any of them.

"This is a perfect example of what not to do," Stone says. "There are so many red lights flashing in your face. He is totally out of his purview and he puts everyone in jeopardy."

By everyone, Stone also means the school district. When sexual violence is alluded to by a student, the criminal activity must be reported to administrators and to the parents if the child is under 18. Under Title IX, administrators must immediately deal with situations involving a hostile school environment, or face investigation by the U.S. Office of Civil Rights.

"The district would be exposed to huge monetary damages and a federal investigation," says Stone, who is the ethics chairperson for the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). "You've got to have a policy in place outlining what has to happen in these cases. You must have the training in place to make sure that your staff understands what has to happen. And remember: All you need is reasonable suspicion that something occurred. You don't have to have all of the facts before you report something."

Stone says it is difficult, if not close to impossible, to hold a school district responsible for a student's suicide. What matters, from a legal standpoint, is whether the school takes the proper steps after learning about an incident to ensure student safety.

Patrice McCarthy, deputy director and general counsel at the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, says making good faith efforts to communicate with parents should be part of an overall philosophy that promotes a positive school climate.

"There's no absolute guarantee that something can be prevented, but in a case like this, the whole communication by our districts to families is an indication that they're being proactive," McCarthy says. "It's not something that's happening in schools, but because you are aware that students are watching this show, you feel a need to put parents and guardians on notice that there are things they can do."

## DIG DEEPER

Robert McGarry is in his first year as superintendent of New Jersey's Holmdel Township Public Schools, a 3,000-student district in a New York City suburb. McGarry is familiar with the issues raised in the show, thanks to his anti-bullying work with GLSEN, an orga-

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nization that serves gay, lesbian, and transgender youth.

In early May, as he looked at letters being sent out by neighboring districts, McGarry says he decided to wait before forming his response. He talked to parent and community leaders and registered for a webinar sponsored by ASCA, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and the National Association of School Psychologists to get more information.

"It's moments like these that force you to dig deeper, to really step back and assess what you're doing to keep kids safe," says McGarry, who invited parents to the district's high school to watch the webinar as a group. "I wanted to send out something that was meaningful and useful."

Forty parents and school staff joined McGarry for the webinar, and he summarized pertinent points in a letter sent out to all parents. He says taking that extra step has "deepened the quality of the conversation" and helped parents "feel a sense of connection to what we are doing."

"People want to know what the schools are doing. The conversation always moves in that direction," he says. "The webinar gave parents some assurances of what schools and communities can do to ensure there is a safe and supportive environment for kids, and we've been having some great conversations internally with our teachers, administrators, and counselors about ways we can get students involved and invested."

Just as important for a first-year superintendent, McGarry says his approach helped build trust with parents and community leaders.

"I think the message on this specific topic was appreciated, because they could see that I took my time in formulating it and did not send out something in a knee-jerk way," he says. "It's my job to make sure I'm improving the lives of our children and those that they share their life with, and they saw that I take that responsibility very, very seriously."

## STARTING A CONVERSATION

This summer, filming starts on season 2 of "13 Reasons Why," again in Kellner's school district. In May, the West Sonoma County school board agreed to let Paramount Television again use Analy High School, with board President Ted Walker noting that the show's willingness

to deal with "current topics that most people don't like to talk about" is as important as the firestorm it created.

Kellner says student response to the show has been "very positive" in the district. He notes that families have said they watched the show together — a recommendation of both mental health experts and the producers — and used it as a springboard for larger conversations.

"Our students have expressed to me that the show speaks to the high school experience in a way that rings true to them," the superintendent says. "There's not a lot of TV out there that gets the high school voice, and the students were pleased to see that."

Throughout the experience, Kellner says the district has taken extra steps to ensure students know resources are available both on and off campus. And he finds it fitting that all California schools are being required by state law to review their mental health and suicide awareness policies this year.

"The show has started a conversation. Like any piece of media, it depends on what we do with those conversations," he says. "I don't think it's a coincidence that the No. 1 play on Broadway this year is 'Dear Evan Hansen,' which has many parallels to '13 Reasons Why.' That shows me [teen suicide and its effect on others] is a subject that really needs to be talked about."

Kellner acknowledges that it's frustrating for school districts to be caught off guard when popular media fails to portray teachers, administrators, and student services staff in an accurate manner.

"As school leaders, we'll always be a little reactive because the world is pushing out content all the time to our students, and we have very little, if any, say over it," he says. "The key is being prepared as much as possible. If we have the policies and procedures in place when something like this comes up, we may not be able to predict the content, but we can certainly fall back on those supports. And that's what we have to do."

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