

Hamilton County Board of Education
Executive Session
Wednesday, January 6, 201

Superintendent Rick Smith made the following statement:

We are devastated by the events that occurred during an athletic field trip during the holidays. Our administration is and will continue to cooperate with any and all investigative agencies concerning this matter. Additionally, we are currently reviewing all procedures, policies, and expectations in the hope that nothing like this ever happens again.

This tragedy has had a profound effect on all of our community, in particular the Ooltewah community. We need to support Ooltewah High School knowing that this is not representative of the nearly 1600 students that attend that proud school.

Because this is an ongoing investigation, I am extremely limited in what I can say or communicate publicly, but I do want everyone to know how heartbroken I am about this but intend to work diligently with my staff, our school board, and the community, to develop the kind of safeguards that will prevent this from ever happening again.

I have been advised by Attorney Bennett that the Sevier County District Attorney's Office and the Gatlinburg Police Department have expressed concern regarding the extent to which the press and social media have been speculating upon the

incident. Their concern is that there has been a significant amount of misinformation and erroneous reporting that threatens to compromise the completion of their investigation. Since the Sevier County Juvenile Court has sealed the file and ordered those involved not to comment, law enforcement is not in a position to correct the public's misperceptions. Accordingly, they have asked the Hamilton County Board of Education to take whatever steps might be reasonable not to fuel the speculation.

A great deal of the public speculation has centered around the operation of Ooltewah High School's boys' varsity basketball program. Since this speculation is likely to continue until the investigation is concluded, and since this speculation could threaten the integrity of law enforcement's investigation, I have decided to end the team's 2015-2016 season.

This decision is not a reflection upon the coaching staff. Indeed, law enforcement officials have, to date, found no evidence that any adult acted improperly. Likewise, this decision is not meant to punish the boys on the team who are innocent of any wrongdoing and who simply want to play a high school sport.

Instead, this decision is a recognition that the needs of law enforcement when investigating criminal wrongdoing must sometimes supersede the normal operations of the school system. Just as this recognition has limited the Administration's ability

to comment upon this matter to date, so to it necessitates that we take this very unusual step so that the criminal justice system can work the way we expect.

The Hamilton County Department of Education is deeply concerned for the welfare of each of its students, and as I stated earlier, it intends to cooperate fully with officials from both the Sevier County and the Hamilton County District Attorney's Offices. As part of that effort, we are asking each of our employees to answer any questions posed by these offices freely and frankly. Apart from participating in any investigation, however, we hope and trust that our employees will not contribute to ill-informed public speculation.

Soon we intend to work with the Board of Education to review any and all policies and procedures to determine whether they are sufficient and whether they are being implemented effectively at the school level. We fully expect that we will identify ways that we can improve existing operations, and we look forward to making the Hamilton County Schools a better environment for all our students.