

I want to first take responsibility for and apologize to the citizens of Hamilton County for the abruptness of the emergency board meeting this past week.

I, as board chair, was acting on the advice of counsel, as well as our local Hamilton County District Attorney, not to discuss in any way the reprehensible events in Gatlinburg on December 22 while that is under criminal investigation.

But clearly, we have responsibilities that go beyond the tragic specifics of the current case – in providing board oversight of the school system -- and in offering as much information as we can for parents and our community about what we are doing to find out all that happened and to make sure it never happens again.

I came up short on both on Wednesday night – and I apologize. I will do better.

It is our responsibility to make sure the district is fully cooperating with law enforcement investigators in Sevier County, and with the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department, who are independently reviewing and evaluating all aspects of this case – and we are doing so. This began earlier in the week when I reached out to our District Attorney to ask if he could perform an investigation into this case. I was pleased to hear that he had already begun conversations with the Sheriff's department about doing just so. This is one way I hope to help begin to restore confidence in our school system.

It is our responsibility to determine whether the Superintendent responded and acted appropriately to this tragic event - and we are doing so.

It is our responsibility to evaluate the roles and responsibilities that both school personnel and volunteer chaperones are asked to play during any overnight or out of town school activity – and we are doing so.

It is our responsibility to confirm that district policies and procedures are in place and are being aggressively followed to prevent any kind of hazing, bullying or harassment in our public schools – and we are doing so.

And it is our responsibility to engage in as many open and transparent conversations as we can with the public and the media about the things we are doing and to listen to their questions and concerns – even when we cannot officially respond -- and we will do so.

Accordingly, I want to announce two public board sessions, where we will meet to discuss these important issues and listen to the concerns of the community.

The first is this Thursday night's, January 14, working session of the board where will be meeting to discuss district hazing and anti-bullying policies – and all policies and procedures related to out of town or overnight school events among others that may be in any way related to preventing tragedies in the future.

Following this policy committee working session will also include a public forum for the board to hear the concerns of the community.

The second upcoming session is our regular board meeting on Thursday, January 21, where we will have our regular business meeting.

Again, that board meeting will include a public forum following the regular business meeting so we can share information with the community and the community can share information and concerns with us.

I cannot take back any of the mistakes made in trying to protect the integrity of the independent investigations and the rights and privacy of those involved – but we can work to do better in sharing what we are doing – and to listen even more carefully to parents, educators and taxpayers in our community as we move forward.

And that's we intend to do.