I read the Al.com article written September 27 by Paul Gattis and the linked story regarding board candidate comments on the school system’s SAFe program to counter school violence and bullying. As I read the linked story in which District 3 board candidates discussed school system review of social media, I was struck by the following comment:

"We need to get back to teaching students in Huntsville and leave this type of investigative activity to police," stated one of the candidates.

His comment indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of the first duty of the Superintendent and the Board, which is to ensure student safety. This is a duty that cannot be outsourced. Equally problematic is his failure to understand that challenges such as cyberbullying and online intimidation, afflictions of the Internet age, can and do impair student learning.

On numerous occasions, in calls to school board members and administrators, and at school board meetings, citizens have voiced their expectations that the school system do more to protect students from bullying, intimidation, and to address threats of suicide that surface in school and online. Some who now object to the school system looking at social media, have previously said schools are not doing enough to protect kids from cyberbullying. Those asking us to address such issues certainly know that these lower-level threats to student wellbeing frequently occur on Facebook and Twitter away from school. Indeed, by definition, cyberbullying occurs on social media. Therefore, one wonders how folks who criticize our SAFe program propose that we document and check on allegations of cyberbullying and online threats to the wellbeing of students.

We know that kids who are cyberbullied are more likely to suffer emotionally and academically. Therefore, while our SAFe program allows us to better share information about immediate threats to schools, it is also a tool we call upon in our efforts to counter cyberbullying and online intimidation, and explore tips we may get about a student who has expressed suicidal intent. Since January 2014, tips and link analysis have cued our SAFe program to view social media postings by about three percent of our students. Thus, the notion that we are monitoring all of our students’ social media is not the case. Rather, we synthesize information from the community, schools, and social media when we have indications of cyberbullying, online intimidation, an impending threat to a school, or when such information links us to other social media. Also, the notion that we should effectively counter ever more challenging problems like cyberbullying and emergent threats to schools without an integrated and timely approach like SAFe is suggestive of muddled rather than systematic thinking focused upon fostering education within safe environments.

We cannot expect the police to address these issues without the active support and participation of the school system. Indeed, by way of recognizing the requirement for school system participation in security and safety efforts, each year the Board of Education invests about $4 million in campus security officers, school resources officers, security technology, security operations, and in training to keep our students, schools, events, and buses safe. As recently as September 15th, this investment allowed us to intercept and place into police custody a student who came to school with a loaded gun, a knife, gang paraphernalia, and an expressed willingness to use his weapons in the event of an altercation with certain
individuals. He was not outfitted to hunt ducks or deer and our security team suffered no confusion in
drawing a distinction between the student as a sportsman and as a threat.

Finally, threats to school safety and student wellbeing know no particular district, age group,
socioeconomic status or race. School safety cannot be left to chance or to others. The Superintendent
and school staffs are responsible to parents and the School Board for student safety. We must take every
threat seriously. When tipped off to information that resides on social media and in other settings
outside our schools, we cannot hold ourselves willfully ignorant of this information, and the scope it
affords us to intercept threats, before they arrive on our buses, at our events, or in our schools.

Casey Wardynski