

Swastikas at School (A)

Dr. Karen Spaulding was in her tidy, bright yellow office at Pierce Middle School just a few days before the winter holiday break when she heard the news. The school day had only recently ended, but it was the first day of winter, and the skies were already growing dark. The sounds of the bustling hallways finally quieted, and Spaulding was catching up on some work. After five years as a principal, she now accepted that her “to-do” list would never be finished. A knock on the door confirmed that this would be the case: one of the custodians discovered swastika graffiti in the upstairs boys’ bathroom. Upon hearing the news, Spaulding put her head down on her desk. “My heart and stomach just sank.”¹ She was shocked and deeply disappointed, but she picked up her head—and then picked up the phone. Her first call was to the superintendent. Spaulding recognized: “You have to respond and take hold of your school. Otherwise, the incident takes hold of your school.”

She understood what her next steps were, as a matter of protocol and procedure, for hate graffiti: first, lock the room and document the graffiti. Next, notify the local police before beginning a school-based investigation to identify, and decide on appropriate consequences for, the student responsible. She knew that it would be important to closely follow protocol so that those involved would be held accountable: this included guarding student privacy and any disciplinary details. More so, she added: “You do try to get to that place where they will say out loud: ‘Yes, I did this,’ because you want them to take ownership and learn from it, and move forward.”

After reviewing the video from the cameras in the school hallways and isolating the timing of the graffiti, it did not take long to identify the students who were likely responsible for the swastikas. Yet as Spaulding reviewed the footage, she thought about all of the other students going in and out of the bathroom who may have seen the graffiti: What about those who saw, but said, or did, nothing? Or those who saw, and now felt less welcome at Pierce Middle School? For Spaulding, a swastika was more than a symbol of hate: “It was a threat.” She explained: “That’s not just ‘I don’t like you’; that’s ‘I want you to die.’”

The training Spaulding received in graduate school and the district guidelines were clear on how to respond to hate graffiti in terms of discipline. “But,” she reflected, “it’s not just about disciplining the child. It’s about putting safety nets and supports in place for those who might be affected, either directly or indirectly, as well as communicating to the community.” She needed to send out a letter to parents as quickly as possible: “I don’t want them to be sitting around the dinner table and the kid saying, ‘Oh by the way, there were some swastika graffiti in the bathrooms.’ And the parents being like ‘What, what?’” She emphasized: “I want to be the one to get the message to parents.”

Principal Spaulding

When people tell Dr. Karen Spaulding “You’re not like any other principal I’ve met,” she considers it a compliment. Spaulding explained: “And it’s not just that I wear jeans and a t-shirt at work in the summertime.” Instead, she emphasized: “It is this idea that I firmly believe that I can’t do this alone. That I need to make connections with parents, with teachers, with the students, and the community.” She reflected: “On the one hand, this work is very isolating, because you are sort of ‘it’: the end of the line, so to speak. On the other hand, you cannot do this job in isolation.” As a principal, “there is no manual,” she reflected. So, when the

swastika graffiti appeared, as she considered how to quickly draft the letter and develop a longer-term response, she thought: “What’s really important is to approach it as a problem-solving opportunity and involve as many people as you possibly can.”

Before becoming a principal, Spaulding spent 17 years teaching math and science at the middle school level. She enjoyed classroom teaching: “I had actually no interest at all in becoming a principal because it did not look like any fun.” Yet, she noted: “I’ve been lucky to be able to find a balance between doing the things that I have to do, like making sure there are enough desk chairs when they come back in the fall, and the pencils have been ordered ...but also being able to have some really powerful conversations with teachers around instruction. Because excellent teaching is what we’re here for: teaching and learning.”

Pierce Middle School

The only public middle school in the affluent town of Milton, Massachusetts, Pierce Middle School is a sprawling, well-maintained brick building. The building houses over 900 students in grades 6-8 and nearly 80 teachers and staff. Spaulding spent a couple of years as an elementary school principal before taking on the role at Pierce. She reflected: “I loved elementary, but just: when you’re a middle school person, you’re a middle school person.” She brightened as she spoke about the students, with laugh lines forming around her eyes: “Oh, they’re just such a *mess*, and I mean that in the best sense of the phrase.” She continued: “They are just at that place where they are trying to figure out who they are and where they belong. And although they do spend some of their time trying to outsmart the adults—actually a lot of time trying to do that—there’s just this level of honesty and really wanting to do the right thing.” Spaulding added, “And so it’s just such a critical time to have them surrounded by adults who really get them. And that’s really true for all the folks in the building, which is why it’s such a great place to be.”

Like most large middle schools, Spaulding observed: “There is no shortage of problems.” She noted: “There’s always one, after the other, after the other. From the smallest thing to the larger thing.” Spaulding explained: “And the challenge, of course, is also keeping all of that in balance, because I am committed to being an instructional leader, and that is hard when something happens that takes your attention.” When a major problem comes up, she continued, “you drop all of the observations you thought you were going to do you, drop all of the curriculum meetings you thought you were going to visit, because *that* needs your attention.” And the swastikas in the bathroom, Spaulding thought, represented a problem of greater severity—and complexity—than others she had encountered before.

Moving Forward

Within hours of the incident, her investigation was well underway, as were ongoing conversations with the police, the school board president, and the superintendent. Later that evening, she went to the superintendent’s office for further discussion. Together, they shared the news with Rabbi Benjamin, the leader of the town’s only synagogue. It was the hardest call Spaulding had to make: “I felt like I had let him down, or that Pierce Middle School had done this hateful thing towards Jews—as opposed to this 14-year-old child doing something really terrible.” Rabbi Benjamin was warm and supportive, but Spaulding still felt heartbroken. “It makes it look like you have this horrible place for learning—and educators take their work really personally.” She wondered to herself: “What else could I have done, so it wouldn’t have happened?”

Early the next morning, Spaulding gathered together the teachers and staff at Pierce Middle School. She wanted to tell them about the swastika graffiti, face-to-face, before a letter went out to the larger school community. As she spoke, she scanned the room to see the reactions: “And they ranged from the shaking of the head, to a gasp, or a sigh.” The look on one teacher’s face struck her: “It was sad, yet scared ... And I could see her eyes welling up, and I could see her fighting back the tears.” The teacher was a member of the local Jewish congregation.

Spaulding explained to the teachers and staff that there would be two responses to the graffiti: “One is in the immediate future, which is all about investigating, putting into place whatever consequences and educational pieces that are needed for those individual students.” The second was “the bigger picture, of moving forward.”

Although those next steps were not as clear in the moment, it was clear that the teachers and staff felt as shocked and disappointed about the swastikas as she did. As the meeting concluded, they asked her, ““What can we do, Karen? What can we do?”” The teacher whose eyes had been welling up quickly left the room.

In late 2016 and early 2017, swastika graffiti appeared in more than 15 schools in the Greater Boston area. In Newton, Massachusetts, a middle school principal’s failure to report two incidents of anti-Semitic graffiti led to community outcry; the principal was later reassigned to a non-leadership role in the district. In Stoughton, Massachusetts, two teachers were disciplined for their responses to a swastika incident at their school.

Endnotes

¹ All quotes from Dr. Karen Spaulding: Dr. Karen Spaulding, interviews by author, Milton, MA, July 28 and July 31, 2017.