

## **Swastikas at School (B)**

After her meeting with the teachers and staff at Pierce Middle School, Dr. Karen Spaulding went to find the teacher who left in tears. Spaulding found her sitting alone in her classroom. Spaulding reflected, “It hit her, it struck her, particularly hard. It was a reminder that, unfortunately, there are some hateful acts and people who do hateful things out there. And even though these are only 14-year-olds, who my sense is, do not have a full understanding of what they were doing, it still is incredibly painful and hurtful.”<sup>1</sup>

Later that afternoon, roughly 24 hours after the swastika graffiti appeared, Spaulding sent a letter to the school community. 43 minutes after the letter went out, she received her first phone call: Fox News wanted a comment from the principal. Her response, after consulting with the superintendent, was brief: “Please refer to my letter.”

Spaulding’s letter stated:

I write this afternoon to share with you that swastikas were recently discovered in one of our student bathrooms. This is extremely troubling and highly inconsistent with the inclusive culture that we are committed to creating at the Pierce Middle School. In response to these incidents, we immediately and thoroughly investigated, identified who was responsible, and followed up as is dictated by the Code of Conduct in the Pierce Middle School Handbook. I especially wish to reassure you that I and my entire staff are firmly committed to fostering a safe, supportive, and welcoming environment for every member of our community. To that end, this type of behavior will not be tolerated at the Pierce Middle School. In addition, I will be working closely with my leadership team and the entire faculty in the days to come to determine appropriate educational next steps.

Her letter continued by offering support to those who need it and providing the contact information for each guidance counselor by grade; she also included her direct line and email. It concluded: “I thank you in advance for partnering with us in our efforts and wish you and your family peace in the coming year.”

In addition to eager reporters, the letter generated responses from concerned parents and upset citizens of Milton. While most parents who knew her trusted that she was handling the situation, some were focused on the punishment which she was not at liberty to discuss. Those in the wider community often asked: “How could this have happened?” Some asked: ““What is happening at that school?””

Over break, Spaulding spent some of her time recovering from the flu, and much of her time thinking about next steps. In addition to talking with the police detectives about their parallel investigation, there were conversations with Rabbi Benjamin, the superintendent, the assistant principal, the dean of students, and staff. A teacher-leader group already emerged, and others were showing interest: ““What can we do? How can we move this forward?”” The first step in moving forward would be for Principal Spaulding to talk to the student body.

## **Assemblies to Start the New Year**

With more than 300 students in each grade, the Pierce Middle School auditorium isn't big enough for the entire student body to come to an assembly together. Spaulding would have to give three separate assemblies, one for each grade. She did not mind, however, given the differences between the 6th graders and the 8th graders. Recognizing the irony, she explained: "If one group in particular was not going to handle it maturely, it was going to be the 8th grade." Spaulding continued, "The snickering and the eyes rolling and things like... 'I'm too grown up for this stuff' sort of attitude comes typically more from 8th grade. Whereas 6th grade, you can tell them any story, and they'll hang on your every word, at least for the most part." She was also aware that the 6th graders were newer to the school, having only been in middle school for four months when the swastikas appeared, and they might need even more reassurance: "Like, 'This is a safe place where everyone is welcome.'"

Overall, the message she wanted to offer to all of the students was the same, yet she was unsure about sharing a personal story. "On my walk from [the office] to the auditorium, which is a little bit of a hike, literally it was going back and forth in my head. 'I'm going to do it.' 'No, I'm not going to do it.' 'It's going to be great.' 'It's going to be terrible.'" She was aware that the kids responsible for the hate graffiti would be in the audience, too. "I didn't want all 300 kids to turn around and look at them while this was happening." Spaulding didn't want the message to be: "'You know, if you do this really bad thing like that other kid did, you're going to get this consequence,' but rather, 'We are a community.'"

I framed my conversation around that idea that: "You need to know the rules, you need to follow the rules, there are consequences. That aside: we are a community. And a number of you, either in this particular incident or other ones, saw something [you] knew wasn't right. And doing the right thing, and doing something about it, is really, really, really, really, hard."

Spaulding shared a personal story: one day, when she was leaving a hair salon, she heard some of the hairdressers telling racist jokes about African Americans. "And I was absolutely disgusted," she said. "And yet, I didn't say anything. I didn't intervene. I didn't say that it's not OK with me.' Being the wife of an African American male and the mother of a biracial child, in particular, I felt this incredible guilt, like, 'Why couldn't I get the courage to say something?'" After she left, she wrote a letter to the owner of the salon, but in that moment when she could have said something, she recalled: "I didn't."

Spaulding told the students:

I didn't because I was scared. I was afraid to do the right thing. I didn't know how they would react. ... So, I get it. I get that doing the right thing, even as a bystander, is a really hard thing to do. But if we're going to be the kind of community that we really want to be, we really have to do the right thing when we see something that we know is not quite right. We need to do the right thing.

She recalled: "And you could hear a pin drop in the auditorium... 6th grade, 7th grade, 8th grade. You could hear a pin drop. I moved around the front of the auditorium, those eyes moved right with me...They were hanging on my every word, which does not always happen in middle school (laughs); it never actually happens."

After the assembly, several parents called Spaulding to tell her about the impact her speech made on their children. “The first thing out of their mouth when they walked in the door was ‘You will not believe what Dr. Spaulding told us today!’ Which was actually really cool because, as we know middle school students, if you ask them what they did at school today, they say: ‘Nothing.’ ‘We did nothing.’”

### **Moving Forward**

Although she was buoyed by the success of the assemblies, Spaulding knew that their efforts as a school had just begun. “I know one-shot deals don’t change culture. And so, I just basically said to the staff, ‘Are you interested in continuing this conversation of how do we as a school create a really welcoming environment for all students, for all families, for all faculty members? How do we really do that?’” They formed a group called “We Are Pierce” to make a statement: “Those incidents do not define who we are. And we will not let them define who we are. But in order to do that, we have to do some real positive work, and make sure that we are—on an ongoing basis—talking about the culture of the school and how welcoming we are being.”

At the same time, the humanities coordinator at Pierce began taking a close look at the curriculum “to really understand how diverse it is, how culturally sensitive it is, the novels we read, the units we do.” Together, they reached out to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), Facing History and Ourselves, and Teaching Tolerance. Spaulding welcomed ADL’s resources for teacher trainings and peer trainings, which the school regularly used, but also wanted something for the wider community. “What we were looking for was really some talking points for families.” She believed that most parents would not have time to read a 300-page book and knew that the schools could not do everything by themselves. Rabbi Benjamin, and the Milton Interfaith Community Association (MICA), agreed. Soon, they were working together to develop brief parent-children discussion guides, customized for different age groups.

### **Praying on the Way to School**

Every morning after the swastika incident, as Spaulding drove to school, she would pray: “Please, please don’t let another student do more swastika graffiti.” She recalled: “We had been doing such, I think, really positive, proactive, ‘we’re-going-to-get-ahead-of-this’ work. And yet, as someone who’s been doing middle school for a long time, I know you can do the best work and they’re just middle school students and they do stupid, really stupid, things.” She continued: “I know middle school students are a work-in-progress and their actions—99.99 percent of the time—their actions do not reveal who they are as people. It reveals other stuff that they have going on in their brains, going on in their lives.” Spaulding explained: “I do know we have great power to make positive change. But I also know that that takes time and it’s hard, hard work.” She added, “And I know it could take a second for a child to make a poor decision.”

On March 8, 2017, a second set of swastikas was discovered in two of the boys’ bathrooms. Although she was “absolutely deflated and heartbroken,” once again, she had to respond. In many ways, her response was the same: document, investigate, communicate, give consequences, and educate. She noted: “I’d much rather handle, you know, a fist fight over at Kelly Field. That I can manage, because that happens, and people get that. It’s just that idea of not wanting it to define who the school is.” Above all, she felt protective of the reputation of her students. “You just don’t want the world to think ‘Oh, the children in this building are like that.’” And she noted: “In the end I’m responsible for everything that happens in this building.”

On March 9, she issued a second letter about swastikas at Pierce Middle School. The letter began: “Dear Pierce Community, I am deeply saddened to inform you that late in the school day yesterday graffiti depicting swastikas was found in the 8th grade boys’ bathroom and the 6th grade boys’ bathroom.” Spaulding noted that the school’s investigation was underway, that the police had been contacted, and that disciplinary consequences would follow. She added: “We will also take appropriate steps to remedy the negative impact of these acts upon the school community and to restore a sense of safety and support for all.” She continued: “The fact that swastika graffiti was again found in the Pierce Middle School is far, far beyond disappointing.” The letter outlined the steps taken since the last incident in December and concluded by reiterating that “this behavior will not be tolerated at the Pierce Middle School. ...I am appalled and heartbroken by these acts.”

Spaulding was surprised by the response. “I certainly expected: ‘Are you serious?!’ ‘What’s going on there?!’” But by then, the school’s efforts to combat intolerance were well known, so Spaulding received calls of encouragement and more offers to help. She added, “And, sadly, similar things were happening all over the place, all over Massachusetts. All over the United States.”

### **A Broader Response**

Shortly after the March incident, a parent approached Spaulding with a plan to have a candlelight vigil against hate on the steps of Pierce Middle School. Spaulding deeply appreciated their response, but she was also concerned: “I was trying so hard to have the swastika incidents not define the Pierce Middle School.” Yet the event, the parent explained, was about more than the swastikas at the Pierce Middle School: it was a response to a range of incidents of hate and bigotry in local schools and communities. At “Milton Against Hate: Joining Our Voices for a Better Tomorrow,” a list of recent hate incidents was read aloud, including a prior incident of anti-Semitic vandalism in Milton, as well as other Massachusetts communities. The chorus teacher led the group, which included some Pierce students, in song.

Local faith leaders offered prayers. Shortly after, the collaboratively developed discussion guides, “It’s Time to Talk About Hate,” were distributed widely. Rabbi Benjamin and the local interfaith group worked to get local organizations to help get the word out; even the Milton soccer league participated.

Later that spring, a Holocaust survivor came to speak at the school, based on an eighth grader’s suggestion. The student told Spaulding, “I have this neighbor, she’s a Holocaust survivor, and I think that the Pierce Middle School students really need to hear from her.” Spaulding agreed, yet worried that the graphic content might overwhelm some of the younger students. “OK, you can’t strip it away, but I also don’t want to traumatize a child.” She sent a letter to families and advised that they would have adjustment counselors and guidance counselors available after the talk. Spaulding became teary-eyed as she described the students’ response to the survivor’s moving presentation: a few 7th grade students asked if they could hug her afterwards. “And then this line just started, and they all came down and they hugged her. The same thing happened at the 8th grade assembly, and ...it was just really powerful.”

Around the same time, another parent, who is not a member of a minority religious community herself, brought in posters and offered them to the principal. The posters read “All are welcome here,” and featured the image of a woman wearing a headscarf. Spaulding displayed one on the front office door, and shared copies with teachers who were interested. A few weeks later, the father of one of the school’s few Muslim students came into the office to express his sincere thanks: Spaulding was gratified, but surprised, to see that he was overwhelmed with emotion. She reflected: “It was not only that touching that he saw the poster, but then: if

that struck him so much, what are all his other experiences like?” Months after the incidents, she recognized that her thinking about the impact of the swastikas became broader:

So, it’s about our students who are Jewish, it’s about our faculty who are Jewish. But it’s also the students who are sitting right next to them saying “Well, hold on a minute. You know, I’m black what does that mean? What’s the next thing they’re going to be putting on the walls—are they going to be drawing lynches on the bathroom walls?” Or the Latino students sitting next to that student thinking “What does this mean?” Or the female student? ... What does it mean, in a response, to also pay attention to those groups? How can you, besides saying “I’m so sorry this happened, and you know I’m going to do everything to make sure it doesn’t happen again”? What are the real tangible ways that you can—visible signs, visible things that you can do to communicate to those groups that you are actively—that you are on the job? And I think that that’s an important part of just being a principal in general, but definitely being a principal through a crisis. That it is not just managing the crisis, but it is paying attention to those groups who are looking in and they want to feel safe.

Spaulding also recognized, on further reflection, that the guidance for responding to other hate symbols is not as clear. “What does constitute a hate crime? ...If it had been the N-word, would that have resulted in a letter to all of the parents and news coming and all of that? ...Probably not.” She added: “And why not?”

### **A Problem-Solving Opportunity**

Looking back at the challenges of the 2016-2017 school year, Spaulding jokes that her new motto is: “everything is a problem-solving opportunity.” She added, “Although I’ll admit that was initially some positive self-talk to get myself through some of those problem-solving opportunities.” In addition to the two swastika graffiti incidents, she also had another newsworthy event when a student made violent threats against the school in a rap song posted online. Once again, her curriculum meetings and the classroom visits had to wait while she focused on the problem at hand. Yet for Spaulding, the swastikas were a greater challenge. “It’s not just about managing the incident; it’s about managing your school culture. And I could see myself, I guess, on the other side of the rap song incident. And I don’t see myself on the other side of the swastika incidents, because it’s bigger work to do.”

While she wished the swastika incidents never happened, she explained: “In some ways, incidents like that accelerate—or help resurface things—that you hope you are fully dedicated to, and explicitly dedicated to.” Almost one year after the first swastika graffiti appeared in her school, she reflected: “I just think my part of the work ahead is for me to continue to feel that sting of those incidents.”

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### **Endnotes**

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