

**Benjamin Stoddert Middle School  
July 28, 2017 • Parent Meeting  
Questions and Answers**

Included in this document are responses to questions asked most frequently by parents on July 28 at the first school parent meeting following the arrest of Carlos Bell, former instructional assistant.

The second parent meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m., Wednesday, Aug. 16 at Benjamin Stoddert.

**What was the timeline and process for action for addressing an accusation of sexual assault against Mr. Bell?**

- The accusation of sexual assault against Mr. Bell occurred on June 30, 2017, through a sealed indictment. The State’s Attorney unsealed the indictment on July 3 during Mr. Bell’s initial court appearance on the charges. Following the release of the indictment, Charles County Public Schools (CCPS) notified staff and parents throughout the school system of the charges.
- On Dec. 22, after a Charles County Sheriff’s Office (CCSO) detective notified CCPS he was investigating a parent complaint concerning a questionable text message, CCPS removed Mr. Bell from his coaching responsibilities at La Plata High School and put him on administrative leave from his Instructional Assistant position at Benjamin Stoddert Middle School. Officers checked all school computers/electronics that Mr. Bell may have had access to, but did not find anything at that time. This is protocol any time a staff member faces an accusation of possible misconduct involving texting a student.
- While on administrative leave, Mr. Bell was assigned to work a temporary job during the investigation, and ordered not to have contact with any students or enter any school property other than CCPS administrative offices.
- CCPS was not provided any additional information about Mr. Bell by the Sheriff’s Office or the State’s Attorney’s Office until the Superintendent was notified on June 30 of the sealed indictment. A complete timeline is posted on the school system’s website at [www.ccboe.com/investigationupdate](http://www.ccboe.com/investigationupdate).

**Why was the Superintendent, Board members or other public officials not in attendance for the July 28 parent night to address the community in light of the nature of the issue at hand?**

The school principal hoped to host an independent meeting to include an overview and small group discussions, then engage parents about school safety and the charges against Mr. Bell. The principal scheduled two parent nights to meet and work with parents at the school level and eventually form a school task force for safety. The Superintendent and Board have since heard parents’ request. The Superintendent will participate in the second parent night on Aug. 16. Board members who are available will attend that night as well.

**What will the system put in place to keep students safer in the future?**

CCPS has already put into place a number of trainings and safety enhancements, not only at Benjamin Stoddert Middle School, but at all CCPS facilities. The following actions directly affect Benjamin Stoddert:

- Increasing staff and parent training on recognizing and preventing child sexual abuse. Next week, experts from the Center for Children will begin training CCPS staff on how to prevent, recognize and react to child sexual abuse. This is the start of what will be more than a month-long plan to train all CCPS staff through a nationally recognized program called Stewards of Children. This training is in addition to the annual safe schools training employees are already required to complete. There will also be similar training and presentations available for parents in the fall.
- Conducting safety assessments at Stoddert. This has resulted in four additional cameras placed in common areas at the school as well as additional clearing and tree/bush trimming on the walking path to improve visibility and safety.
- Addressing parent and staff concerns regarding discipline at the school. Interim Principal Marvin Jones is reviewing concerns and procedures and working with staff to strengthen current practices.
- Adding an administrator to the team, totaling five (including Mr. Jones).
- Increasing visibility of administrative offices and administrators by relocating offices to high traffic areas.
- Scheduling three psychologists — one for each grade level — for the first week of school and for however long there is a need for additional personnel.
- Reviewing all policies (Board) and procedures (staff), especially those related to child abuse, to provide understanding of how something like this occurred at a school and what staff can do to help prevent it from happening again.
- Consulting with experts and reviewing child sexual abuse prevention lessons for teachers and counselors to provide for students.

### **What will be put in place for student victims to support them moving forward?**

In early July, CCPS secured support for student victims upon learning about the severity of the charges against Mr. Bell. CCPS has partnered with the Charles County Department of Health and the Center for Children to ensure the victims and their families have information and easy access to free and confidential medical and counseling services. There is a court-issued protective order safeguarding the identity of the children; however, the Superintendent regularly checks with those involved with the investigation to make sure families are receiving the information they need to easily seek help.

Anyone needing support can call:

- Shelby McKimmie with the health department HIV testing program at 301-609-6953 to make an appointment; and/or
- Sara Ortiz, Victim Services Coordinator, at 301-609-9887 to make an appointment through the Center for Children.

### **What about student victims that now attend high school? Will they receive support and counseling as well?**

Charles County Public Schools is working with the **Charles County Child Advocacy Center** to offer free therapy for victims of sexual abuse during and after the investigation through a federal Victims of Crime Act grant. This is available to all victims, regardless of which school they might

now attend. Please call 301-609-9887 and ask for Sara Ortiz, Victim Services Coordinator, to make an appointment.

**How can schools maximize camera presence?**

CCPS staff surveyed the school's 38 cameras, reviewing locations, visibility and coverage. As a result, it was determined that several common areas could benefit from additional camera coverage. CCPS has ordered and will install four additional cameras to these areas prior to the start of school.

**What are the parameters around the roles of instructional assistants?**

Instructional assistants assist teachers in planning instructional activities. This includes working with individual students or small groups to provide additional help after the teacher delivers the instruction. Sometimes assistants are used to fill in as substitutes when schools are unable to cover vacancies.

**Is the administration at the school informed when a coach changes the practice location?**

This is the expected practice when such a change is being considered. The administration would deny the request if there were concerns. For the five seasonal intramural sports that occur at the middle school level (basketball, track, volleyball, golf and archery) this kind of occurrence is extremely rare. There is typically no reason to go off site except perhaps to practice on an actual high school track.

**Is the administration at the school informed when a coach gives out their phone number to students?**

This practice is discouraged at the middle school level. The rationale is that coaches can share their phone numbers with parents but have no reason to share their numbers with students directly. Any parent with knowledge of a coach or CCPS staff member contacting an individual child by phone, email, text or social media should immediately report the incident to the principal.

**Is there amnesty for staff to report what they know or saw during the time Mr. Bell was employed at Stoddert?**

Any sort of retaliation against staff for reporting information that needs to be reported is not tolerated. All staff should feel free to report what they know regarding this matter. Any staff, parent or student who has any information regarding the investigation can also call the Sheriff's Office's confidential tip line at 1-800-225-5324.

**When teachers are let go, why isn't the community informed?**

Generally, personnel matters, including the details of reprimands, evaluations and terminations, are protected by Maryland Public Information laws, whereby sharing employee records with the public is prohibited. The parents of students directly taught by these individuals are typically informed if a teacher will not be returning, though detailed circumstances are not shared by the school. In this case, the individual was an assistant, assigned to help teachers or work with small groups of students. He was not the primary teacher; therefore, no list of homeroom students was assigned to him. We are reviewing notification protocols to ensure our practice is consistent and uniform.

**Why weren't the parents at Stoddert informed when the track team at La Plata was informed?**

During the time of the police investigation, school system personnel were not aware police were investigating more than an alleged inappropriate text message from Mr. Bell to a La Plata track team member, until criminal charges were filed in June.

Though we were not made aware of the details of the text messages, on Dec. 22 the school system removed Mr. Bell from the school and placed him on administrative leave until the investigation was completed, as is the normal procedure. On Dec. 28 (during Winter Break) a Charles County Sheriff's Office detective contacted La Plata High School and CCPS stating he wanted to speak with parents and students on La Plata's track team about the allegation against the track coach.

At that time, CCPS agreed to send a letter to the parents of the track team members letting them know that a detective may contact their children as part of an investigation. The La Plata High School principal sent the letter to a total of 47 people — all parents of track team members. At that point, the school system did not think it had reason to send mass communication on this matter to the student body (at La Plata nor Stoddert). This follows protocol when allegations of inappropriate (adult) behavior arise, with initial no charges filed.

**How do we address the overall climate at Stoddert?**

Many of the action items underway address the culture and climate at Stoddert. Some changes are immediate, and others require review and possible revision of policies, discipline practices and administrative procedures. We need parents to assist and provide input as we go through the safety assessment at Stoddert.

**Has an incident like the one that happened at Stoddert happened in the school system before?**

No.

**How often are employee background checks conducted and to what level?**

All candidates complete an employment application, which includes references. New hires, including substitutes and temporary employees, are fingerprinted. These fingerprints are submitted to the Criminal Justice Information System (CJIS) which searches both the Maryland and FBI databases. CCPS receives a report from CJIS typically within three to five business days. If there is a reportable incident, the Office of Human Resources determines whether the incident disqualifies the individual from employment.

Additionally, I-9 forms are completed to verify eligibility to work in the United States. Mandated training is conducted regarding blood borne pathogens, reporting of suspected child neglect/abuse, the CCPS drug and alcohol policy and more. Additionally, CCPS requests a Child Protective Services background clearance request. Child Protective Services notifies CCPS of any child abuse findings involving prospective employees. If at any time an employee is charged with a reportable offense, CJIS notifies the school system. Mr. Bell passed all background checks and did not have any charges during his employment with CCPS.

**Is there a plan for more frequent employee background checks?**

At this time, there are no plans to increase the frequency of background checks. After the first background check, CJIS notifies the school system if an employee is charged criminally. In this

case, Mr. Bell twice passed a criminal background check before being hired and was not charged again while employed. If Mr. Bell had been charged with criminal activity during his employment, CJIS would have sent a notice to the CCPS Human Resources Office, on which CCPS would have taken action.

**Will there be more officers, security guards or cameras put in place in Stoddert?**

The Superintendent, CCPS security manager and others have surveyed the school and received a recommendation to add four additional cameras in the school common areas. CCPS will install the cameras prior to the opening of school on Sept. 5. Stoddert, like all county middle schools, has one School Resource Officer dedicated to the school.

**Is there a plan to make an administrative change at Stoddert (principal, vice-principals)?**

The Superintendent of Schools as already made administrative changes at the school. The principal has been reassigned and Mr. Marvin Jones is serving as interim principal. Additionally, in June, the Superintendent announced vice principal transfers which included moving Cynthia Panizzi to Westlake High School and Mr. Brian Shannon from General Smallwood Middle School to Stoddert. Another administrative position has recently been approved for Stoddert as well.

**How will we make sure the building is secure on the first day? What is the plan for the first day?**

There is a lot of work taking place at Stoddert now to prepare for the first day of school. There will be extra personnel assigned to the school and staff and administrators will have completed additional training. Additionally, prior to school opening, Mr. Jones and the administrative staff are planning for three grade-level family nights. Mr. Jones will let parents know the time and date for each family night.

**Can students have more cell phone access to report information throughout the day (to their parents)?**

The cell phone policy for all middle schools will remain consistent across the county. There are no plans to change the policy this school year. Student cell phones must be powered completely off and put away, unless engaged in an authorized Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) activity.

**Who do we talk to show support for the staff?**

Please talk to Mr. Jones to offer support for staff.

**Can students have the number to DSS to make reports directly when they suspect something?**

Children should report any suspected child abuse to their parents, a teacher, counselor or administrator at the school. All educators are mandated by law to report any suspected child abuse or neglect. Reporting does not require proof that child abuse or neglect has occurred. Cases of child abuse or neglect are to be reported as soon as they are suspected. Anyone making a “good faith” report is immune from civil liability and criminal penalty.

**Based on the situation with Mr. Bell, will school change requests be granted?**

School change requests are considered on a case-by-case basis. Parents wishing to request a school change for their child should complete school change request application and mail it to Student Services Specialist, Charles County Public Schools, P.O. Box 2770, La Plata, MD 20646, fax it to

301-392-7511 or email it to [ssavoy@ccboe.com](mailto:ssavoy@ccboe.com). The school change request application can be found at <http://www.ccboe.com/community/parents/index.php>.

**Will there be a two-person accountability system put in place?**

CCPS is unable to assign two adults to every classroom. Principals and staff are reviewing appropriate adult/child interactions in schools to help employees recognize high-risk situations before an incident of abuse occurs and to teach children what to expect from a safe and secure learning environment.

**Will the changes from tonight's meeting be made before the start of school?**

A number of changes, including arranging for more accessible administrative offices, smaller math and reading classes, and safety and security checks, moving administrators' offices, policy and procedure review and more, are already completed or underway.

**What are the steps when responding to an accusation of sexual assault by an employee?**

The process for addressing any accusation of sexual abuse/assault or child abuse is the following:

- The accusation is forwarded to the Department of Social Services (DSS), which notifies the Charles County Sheriff's Office.
- The school system immediately removes the employee from the school and places him/her on administrative leave or assigns the employee to a temporary job with the administrative office.
- The school system cooperates fully with DSS and the Sheriff's Office in any investigation.
- Once DSS and the Sheriff's Office finish their investigations, the school system reviews and conducts its own investigation to ensure the employee has followed all internal policies and procedures, prior to returning to work, if at all.
- If there are no findings, charges or violation of school policies, the employee is returned to work.
- If there are findings, the employee may be dismissed, disciplined or retrained.
- This process can take anywhere from one day to more than a year to complete. To be thorough in each case, school system investigations are not put on a mandated deadline.

**How will communication with parents be improved so that it is both immediate and consistent throughout the school year? (digital/app)**

Mr. Jones and the school system will keep Stoddert parents fully and immediately informed of any developments in the investigation or any changes made at the school. The school district follows consistent communications protocols. Each incident is different and we constantly assess and adjust as the magnitude of the incident and its aftermath unfold. An addition to our communication tools this school year is the availability of text messaging to parents. Parents will be able to opt in or opt out of receiving text messages from the school and school system starting Oct. 1.

**How long has Mr. Bell's behavior been going on?**

The only information the school system has received is the indictment, which includes a range of possible dates that span from August 2015 to May 2017. The dates of alleged crimes that occurred at school are listed in the indictment as between August 2015 and Dec. 22, 2016. The indictment says the State (prosecutor) is unable to be more specific because of the ages of the victims and

their inability to provide specific dates. At this time, that is the only information we have, but expect that as the investigation progresses, we will learn more.

**Can we make sure that after school activities have more than one adult? What is the policy?**

At the elementary and middle school levels, after-school activities are often led by one teacher or staff member. Requiring two adults to be present during all after-school activities is a possibility, but may limit the number of opportunities we are able to offer to students. Principals and staff are being reminded about proper procedures when working with students, especially one-on-one, and to do so with doors open and windows uncovered. Additionally, administrators are being reminded to routinely walk through hallways, visit classrooms and monitor storage spaces, bathrooms, trailers and other isolated areas of the school.

**How are students' concerns heard?**

Students can share their concerns with a teacher, counselor, vice principal or principal. If a student is uncomfortable talking to someone at the school, they should share concerns through their parents, who can talk to someone at the school. If the issue is not resolved at the school level, a parent can call the administrative offices at 301-932-6610 and ask to speak with an executive director of schools.

**Can you place cameras in the trailers?**

Benjamin Stoddert has 38 cameras monitoring the inside and grounds at the school. Two outside cameras are focused on the trailers, allowing administrators to see the traffic to and from the mobile classrooms. CCPS does not place cameras in classrooms.

**How do we monitor the integrity of staff?**

If a parent is concerned about the integrity of a staff member, the parent should report it to the principal. The alleged actions of one person do not represent the staff at Stoddert or CCPS. The staff at Stoddert is composed of dedicated, professional educators who make a positive difference in the lives of children every day.