

An Open Letter to Boards of Education & School Administration

I had the pleasure of serving on a Board of Education for over six years. I started an election committee. I hosted community listening sessions. I talked with teachers, support staff, and administration. I assumed that our conversations would solely focus on health insurance, salary steps, working conditions, school resource.

Parents, educators and community members agree, the health and safety of our students is our number one priority.

Yet, the number one concern of my community? The health and safety of our students.

As educators, there is no pain deeper than that of losing a student; to see that empty desk each and every day and know what could have been. When that loss is because of a poor choice that was totally preventable, that pain is even deeper. This is why I serve as the President & CEO of Students Against Destructive Decisions, SADD.

In a world where our students are under constant siege from pressures that we could not have imagined a decade ago, there is no counter-measure more powerful than that of peer-to-peer education. When you think about your school campus, as you write your emergency response plans, I challenge you to think about what you're doing on the prevention side, and I challenge you to start a SADD chapter.

SADD chapters are hubs of safety. They create a space for teens to talk about the risks and pressures they face in their daily lives. Then, they prepare students to be prevention ambassadors, while teaching lifelong leadership skills. We empower our students to speak-up when someone is being unsafe behind the wheel. We respond to the opioid epidemic that is sweeping our nation and the silent battles that continue to rage around underage drinking and drug use. More than ever, our SADD students are our best defense in removing the stigma on mental wellness, starting conversations about teen suicide, eating disorders, and the power of one student to stop the horrific cycle of bullying. SADD chapters change your school environment and help create a culture of inclusion for all.

As school leaders, we work to ensure every student achieves the bright future they so deserve. That starts with health and safety. No single policy, no staff training, no curriculum can keep your teens safe—but to steal from Margaret Mead, a small committed group of students can do that, for indeed that is the only thing that ever has. This is the power of SADD.

My team and I stand ready to help you get your chapter started, as you work with us to empower teens, engage parents, mobilize your community, and change lives. Our Missouri State Coordinator, Angela Bonine, can be reached at abonine@actmissouri.org and (573) 635-6669. Allow Angela or myself to help your chosen faculty member spend a few minutes this fall becoming familiar with our website, the resources available as a chapter, and answer any questions they may have. Together, we can Empower, Engage, Mobilize and foster Change!

All the best,
Rick Birt
Former School Board President
Northwestern Local Schools (Springfield, OH)
President & CEO
SADD, Inc.