

Dear Mid-Prairie Staff Members, Parents and Community Members,

The Mid-Prairie Community School District is undergoing intense public scrutiny based on a decision I made in 2015. I want to give you some of the facts behind this decision.

Trent and Tammy Yoder are the parents of two children that attend the Mid-Prairie School District. Trent Yoder **IS NOT** an employee of the district.

In the Fall of 2014, I become aware that Mr. Yoder, with principal permission, was coming into Kalona Elementary to work with his sons and other students. I told the principal that if Mr. Yoder wanted to continue, he would have to undergo a background check. Upon receiving the background check results that included federal and state criminal checks, a sex offender records search, and an Iowa Adult and Child Abuse Registry check, I turned down Mr. Yoder's request for further classroom involvement.

In the past, I have turned down other parents that wanted to be involved, but Mr. Yoder is the only parent that has appealed my decision. He wanted to know the reasons for the denial. I explained that even though he was removed from the Sex Offender Registry in 2008, I had concerns about his 1998 conviction for Sexual Exploitation of a Child. He was candid and open about his conviction and expressed remorse. He asked if I would reconsider my decision so he could be involved in his sons' education. I laid out a process for him to follow if he wanted me to reconsider.

As one step of the process, I wanted to know everything about his conviction. A former Washington County Prosecuting Attorney, Gerald Partridge, contacted me and asked if I would accept his review and evaluation of Mr. Yoder's criminal case. Among other things, information supplied by Mr. Partridge indicated that Mr. Yoder was convicted on an Alford Plea and sentenced to ten years in prison. After six weeks in jail, Mr. Yoder's case was brought back before the judge and the judge reduced his sentence to time served and placed Mr. Yoder on 4 years of probation. During probation he had weekly counseling sessions. He successfully completed probation in 2003 and was removed from the Sex Offender Registry in 2008. Mr. Partridge also supplied me more specific details about the case.

Other documentation I received as part of the appeal process was the following:

1. A letter from his church pastor detailing Mr. Yoder as the director of the children's choir and pageants and his deep connection to the congregation.
2. A letter from a retired Mid-Prairie long-time elementary teacher detailing her experiences with Trent on several mission trips to Haiti and his interactions with adults and youth and described him as a "fine, caring and upstanding adult."
3. A letter from an Iowa District Court Judge (not the presiding judge in Mr. Yoder's case) who endorsed Mr. Yoder's involvement by stating, "My wife and I would be more than happy to have Trent serve as a volunteer for any activity in which a child of ours participated," and who also observed, "Trent's record over the last seventeen years is

spotless. I believe Trent's past performance is far more relevant to the issues of safety and liability than is a seventeen year old criminal conviction."

4. A letter from a University of Iowa Professor who states, "I have observed Trent interacting with children of all ages. I would have no qualms about Trent serving as a volunteer where he would be in contact with my grandson; in fact, I would be pleased for my grandson to be able to interact with Trent in such a position."

Based on the documentation supplied, my own conversations with Mr. Partridge and Mr. Yoder, Mr. Yoder's remorseful and open manner, and his connections to the community, I approved his application to be a volunteer in the district in April 2015 contingent on one requirement: that he perform any volunteer activities in the presence of another adult. To my knowledge, he has complied with the requirement for another adult to be present.

During the last 4 high school plays, because of his carpentry expertise, Mr. Yoder was given permission to volunteer in building the play set. Again, permission was based on the requirement that another adult be present when working with students. Because of the current concern and confusion over Mr. Yoder's involvement in our schools, his current school involvement has been restricted to activities involving only his sons.

Trent Yoder is not a district employee. He is involved with an activity called "Mid-Prairie Spelling Club." **This activity is not sponsored and not sanctioned by the school district.** It is similar to other club activities that operate in the district like Nitro Softball, Bull Town Baseball, Club Volleyball and Basketball, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Mid-Prairie Summer Football Clinic, Mid-Prairie Girls Summer Basketball Camp, Little Hawk Wrestling Club, etc. These clubs and activities were started and organized by adults on their own. Even though the district may allow these organizations, clubs, and activities to use school facilities, the school district does not sponsor, sanction or directly support these financially.

However, it is now obvious that by allowing the use of "Mid-Prairie" in the spelling club name, it could wrongly be assumed the district is sponsoring and responsible for this club activity. I take full responsibility for allowing this misconception to happen. I have directed Mr. Yoder to stop using "Mid-Prairie" in the name of his club. Even though we allow other outside club activities to use our facilities, in order to send a clear message that the spelling club is not district affiliated, I am also prohibiting Mr. Yoder from using school facilities for future club activities.

Because of this issue, parents have questioned school safety at Mid-Prairie. We take school safety seriously. Currently, we have 66 surveillance cameras in the district and after this summer's work will have over 80 cameras throughout the district's four main attendance center campuses. These cameras are on 24/7 and camera video is saved. The building secretary, building principal and Central Office staff, monitor the cameras. In addition to these building cameras, we have 5 cameras on each district bus, 3 inside and 2 outside.

All of our buildings' main doors have identifiable key card access. Four of our five schools have "buzz-in" systems with the last to be installed soon. During the school day the schools' doors are locked. Visitors and parents must be buzzed into the school's main entrance and sign in through the school office before gaining access to the rest of the building. The Washington County Sheriff's Department has been give 24/7 access to all of our buildings with walk-throughs happening during the school day and at night on a frequent basis.

I do not minimize any of the actions surrounding Mr. Yoder's conviction. His actions were wrong. Sexual Exploitation of a Child is a serious offense and no child should ever suffer that fate. I do not know, or pretend to know, the pain, anger and betrayal victims must feel. My sincerest sympathy is extended to any and all victims.

I apologize about this letter's length but felt the public needed the background information for my decision. I also apologize for my decision being responsible for putting the Mid-Prairie Community School District in a negative light.

There will be a special meeting of the Mid-Prairie School Board tomorrow - Saturday, April 28 – starting at 8:00 AM at the Mid-Prairie Central Administration Office in Wellman. As always, the public is invited to attend.

The decision I made was not easy and was not taken lightly. The central question for each of us to answer in our own hearts is, "Can a person learn and change from his/her past mistakes?"

My own children attended Mid-Prairie and my grandchildren are currently students here. I would never knowingly put my grandchildren or anyone else's children or grandchildren in harm's way.

Yours in service,

Mark Schneider, Superintendent
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