March 1, 2019

Dear PPS Families/Guardians,

Over the past few days, there have been media reports about an online challenge known as the "Momo Challenge". The challenge encourages children, through YouTube and social media messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Snapchat, to carry out dangerous tasks, such as harming themselves or others. A number of our schools have identified they are hearing concerns from parents and students about this game which could have dangerous repercussions. As a District, we always aim to take proactive steps when it comes to internet trends and believe it is important to remind parents and children about online safety in today's digital world.

Although YouTube officials have confirmed, contrary to press reports, that it has not seen any evidence of the videos showing or promoting the "Momo challenge" on its platform, the Pittsburgh Public Schools have set YouTube to restricted mode and have additionally blocked search terms which may lead to the "Momo Challenge." Additionally, the District does not allow internal instant messaging apps or communications apps such as WhatsApp on student devices. In the weeks to come, schools will share tips with students on appropriate digital citizenship to increase their personal awareness and understanding.

Parental awareness and involvement are key to ensuring cyber safety. Explaining the importance of appropriate interactions in an age appropriate way is necessary. Encourage your children to share concerns with you in order to proactively avoid negative interactions. Please review the following recommendations to help keep your children safe when they are using social media and mobile devices:

- Make sure the protection features of websites and software your children use are activated. There are tools available through your Internet Service Provider (ISP) to help you manage your children's online experience (i.e., appropriate websites, amount of time spent online, who can and cannot contact them). It might also include other security features, such as pop-up ad blockers.
- Turn off YouTube's "suggested auto-play" so your children do not view content that they have not selected.
- Get to know the online environments your children use and teach them how to recognize and react appropriately to inappropriate material.
- Remind children not to "friend" or interact online with individuals that they do not know.
- Remind your children to report any inappropriate contact to an adult immediately, even if the person threatens you or tells you not to tell.
- Remind children not to identify their location and/or share private account information with others online.
- Monitor social media accounts used by your children. Pay attention to age limits on social media sites and apps. Most require a child to be at least 13 years of age before they can create an account.
- Set guidelines or rules for social media usage. When needed, review what your children are sending and receiving to ensure proper usage.

- Remind them that the Internet is a public space. Things they do and say now on social networking sites/apps could have implications down the road (one example: when your children are looking for summer employment, since employers often search personal profiles for information about candidates.
- Encourage children to be their own person and not to allow others to define who they are through social media. Remind them they are in control of what they post, and they should not allow others to influence them.
- Be kind online. Do not use social media to post inappropriate or unkind messages. If you are receiving these types of messages, reach out to an adult for support. Talk with your children about cyberbullying, which is defined within PPS Board Policy 215 – Prohibition Against Bullying/Harassment.
- Remind students to think before they post. Sharing provocative photos or intimate details online, even in private emails or messages, will not always remain private. Even people they consider friends may share private information or images, especially if the friendship ends.

In addition to ensuring your children's cyber safety when online or on mobile devices, we also encourage you to keep the dialogue open with your children about their mental health and emotional well-being. Making your home a safe space for these conversations will help ensure your children feel comfortable bringing their questions and concerns forward. Please seek immediate medical attention if your child expresses thoughts about wanting to die or wanting to kill themselves.

Please feel free to reach out to your child's school for support. Each school has resources available through their student services department. As always, we appreciate open lines of communication to ensure the safety of our students when at home and in school. Additional information is available online at https://www.pghschools.org/cybersafety. We will continue to post safety tips or warnings on this site.