



VERONA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Superintendent Corner Column

Important Information on Netflix Series *13 Reasons Why*

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"In every community, there is work to be done. In every nation, there are wounds to heal. In every heart, there is the power to do it." Marianne Williamson

Over the past week, I have had the opportunity to watch several episodes of a newly released Netflix miniseries called *13 Reasons Why*. This new show, executive produced by former Disney star Selena Gomez, is based on the 2007 fictional book by Jay Asher. *13 Reasons Why* tells the story of a teen who commits suicide. This series depicts strong and graphic themes of suicide, sexual assault, drug use, bullying, and other social issues that may affect teens. This series has attracted the interest of many young people, specifically students in middle and high school, with discussions about the show becoming prominent and trending on social media. Although this show is fictional, the nature of the storyline raises serious concerns as to the emotional safety of adolescents who may be watching, especially children who have had experience with mental health issues and suicidal thoughts or behaviors.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that suicide is the second leading cause of death for ages 10-24 (2014). Suicide is a very real issue that leaves behind long lasting and negative effects on families, friends, and entire communities. Verona has tragically experienced such loss firsthand. Talking about suicide, although difficult, is a critical first step and healthy way to process what people are feeling. But mental health experts have repeatedly cautioned on the manner in which suicide deaths are portrayed in the media, which may contribute to the glorification of suicide and potentially causing a contagion effect.

The Verona Public Schools has been engaged in extremely significant efforts over the past several months. Last fall our district, with the support of our Board of Education and engagement

of numerous community stakeholders, mobilized a committee to discuss the issues of mental health and suicide prevention. This committee has established overarching goals that will allow us to meet the needs of our youth while exploring a multitude of resources and approaches that supports the emotional safety of our students.

As a parent and educator, I have serious concerns about the nature of *13 Reasons Why* and the message it sends our children, especially since this show does not always provide appropriate responses to suicide prevention. I do, however, see that there exists an incredible opportunity to have an important and constructive conversation about suicide prevention to protect the emotional health of our students.

We understand that many students have been watching *13 Reasons Why* but we do not recommend that children view this series. We recognize that conversations on this topic can be difficult and may be uncomfortable. If your child is already watching, I encourage you to consider the following recommendations from the *National Association of School Psychologists*. This guidance for families may assist you in navigating dialogue with your child and help shape his or her experience and perspective on this important issue.

1. Ask your child if they have heard or seen the series *13 Reasons Why*. While we don't recommend that they be encouraged to view the series, do tell them you want to watch it, with them or to catch up, and discuss their thoughts.
2. If they exhibit any of the [warning signs](#), don't be afraid to ask if they have thought about suicide or if someone is hurting them. Raising the issue of suicide does not increase the risk or plant the idea. On the contrary, it creates the opportunity to offer help.
3. Ask your child if they think any of their friends or classmates exhibit warning signs. Talk with them about how to seek help for their friend or classmate. Guide them on how to respond when they see or hear any of the warning signs.
4. Listen to your children's comments without judgment. Doing so requires that you fully concentrate, understand, respond, and then remember what is being said. Put your own agenda aside.
5. Get help from a school-employed or community-based mental health professional if you are concerned for your child's safety or the safety of one of their peers.

Additionally, [JED](#) and the [Suicide Awareness Voices of Education](#) (SAVE) collaboratively developed a guide for parents, which we believe you may find helpful as you discuss this topic

with your family. You may click the following link to access the [13 Reasons Why Talking Points](#) as you discuss this series with your child.

Please feel free to review the following information you may find helpful such as [Preventing Youth Suicide: Tips for Parents and Educators](#) and [Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide](#).

The following resources may also be helpful to families in our community.

Mental Health Resources:

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| National Suicide Prevention Lifeline | 1-800-273-TALK |
| NJ Hopeline | 1-855-NJ-HOPELINE (654-6735) |
| 2nd Floor Youth Helpline | 1-888-222-2228 (call or text) |

Training and Education Resources:

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| Traumatic Loss Coalitions for Youth (http://ubhc.rutgers.edu/tlc/) | 1-732-235-2810 |
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District mental health professionals are available to discuss these issues with you and your child. Our staff can also provide additional recommendations for counseling support outside of school. Please contact your child's school counseling department or your principal should you need any assistance.

As adults, our conversations and interactions can have an incredibly profound influence on our children. Please join us in actively listening to our students and helping them navigate adversity in life in a positive and constructive manner.

All my best,

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