



Habersham County Schools

Press Release

New safety procedure to be implemented at all Habersham County Elementary Schools

February 8, 2019

In the Habersham County School System, we continually evaluate safety conditions at all schools. Recently, some of our elementary school principals expressed growing concerns with middle and high school students being on elementary campuses in the mornings and afternoons. A team of system administrators, transportation department leaders, the director of our system safety team, and law enforcement reviewed the concern of our elementary school principals and unanimously determined that an unsafe condition is created when middle and high school students are on elementary school campuses. The safety concerns are for both the younger children in the elementary schools and the older students who are on elementary campuses. Specific safety concerns include the following:

- 1) Opportunity exists for older students to enter the elementary schools in the early morning hours or in the afternoons and make contact with younger children in hallways or restrooms and other areas of the campuses.
- 2) Opportunity exists for older students to get into a vehicle in the afternoons or mornings with an unauthorized person.
- 3) Elementary principals have reported that older students are loitering on their campuses late in the afternoons and that these older students are unsupervised.
- 4) Elementary principals report that older students are dropped off at their schools as early as 6:45 a.m. with no supervision and with opportunity to make contact with elementary school students as they arrive at school.
- 5) Elementary principals have reported finding inappropriate items left by older students inside school buildings and on school grounds.
- 6) The presence of middle and high school students has significantly distracted elementary school teachers and administrators from taking care of the supervisory responsibilities they have for their younger children.
- 7) The presence of middle and high school students at elementary schools has created an unsafe and more complicated traffic situation. Older students weave through cars in parent pick-up lines and parking lots. Parents who come to elementary schools to drop-off and pick-up older students sometimes interfere with the normal flow of elementary parent pick-up.

To keep students at all grade levels safe, the school system must move towards ending the practice of allowing middle and high school students to be dropped off in the mornings or picked up in the afternoons at elementary schools. To be clear, the school system did not create or endorse this practice. Over the years,

this practice was established by parents out of convenience. Understandably, some parents did not want to pick-up or drop-off at more than one school. School buses leaving elementary schools began to be used as unofficial “shuttle buses”. While this practice may have been acceptable in the past, the times have now changed, the population of our school system has grown, and the practice has now become a clear and present safety concern for our elementary students.

Some parents have reported concerns related to this change. We understand that this safety change has resulted in an inconvenience for some parents, but we must make this decision based solely on student safety. In making this decision, the school system had to ask one question: Does this change make students at all grade levels safer? We believe the answer is yes.

Some of the parents who have expressed concerns with the change are using school choice to attend a school outside their attendance zone. When parents exercise school choice they must agree to provide their own transportation to and from school. The Georgia law that governs school choice states: “The parent shall assume the responsibility and cost of transportation to and from school”. Some parents using school choice have been using school buses at elementary schools to meet their needs. This is unfair to the majority of parents who are doing it the right way.

We have determined that the safety change will impact about 150 parents. We have also determined that more than 5800 elementary school parents expect us to take actions like this to keep their children safe. The bottom line is this – More than 3300 elementary children will be safer as a result of this change, and more than 5700 elementary parents are appreciative of our efforts to keep their boys and girls safe while at school.

Safety is the top priority of our school system. The Habersham County School System has been named one of the 25 safest school systems in Georgia for two years in a row. This distinction is due to the fact that when we find an opportunity to make our students safer, we act. Had this not been an issue of safety, we could have delayed a change until next year. When the safety of students is involved, change must take place sooner rather than later.

Some parents that we have spoken with understand the safety concern, but have asked for more time to make arrangements to comply with the change. We have listened and have extended the enforcement deadline to **Tuesday, February 19th**. This gives parents 11 days to make arrangements of their own or to contact our transportation department for bus pick-up and drop-off information. We ask that our parents affected by this important safety change cooperate with their schools and make other arrangements for their middle and high school students in the mornings and afternoons.

Statement from Rhonda Andrews, Habersham County Director of Elementary Schools:

“Everyday 3,325 elementary students attend school at our elementary campuses. Keeping these elementary students safe is the primary concern and number one goal every day for every school system employee on those campuses. The current drop-off and pick-up of middle and high school students compromises the safety of elementary school students. As elementary administrators, teachers, and staff we know that the approximately 5,819 parents of our elementary students expect us to make the safety of their students our priority. They are a silent majority who place their faith in the elementary schools of Habersham County to protect their precious children from any and all risks. This change does exactly that.”