



**THE FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL  
HOMECOMING DANCE – OCTOBER 23, 2009  
INVESTIGATION REPORT**

**PRESENTED TO  
FRANKLIN TOWNSHIP BOARD OF  
EDUCATION  
DECEMBER 22, 2009**

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## PREFACE

We present the account of this investigation report and the recommendations that follow to the Franklin Township Board of Education, the Superintendent and the Franklin Township Community. This investigation report was prepared by two former Superintendents, a former Director of Compliance Investigations for the N J Department of Education and an Attorney. We have united our collective backgrounds and experiences to give one voice to the findings in this report.

The unifying purpose for us is demanded by the shocking events of October 23, 2009 that cause unimaginable suffering in the Franklin Township Community. The School District was not totally prepared, and it has been asked over and over again how can such a tragedy be avoided in the future? To this end an independent investigation was requested.

Our mandate was simple and straightforward. We were directed to investigate the facts and circumstances relating to the civil disturbance at the Franklin High School Homecoming Dance. This includes gathering information from students, teachers, Administrators, Security Officers, parents and law enforcement.

In carrying out our mandate we reviewed hundreds of pages of documents, interviewed numerous individuals in the School District, and parents whose children attend the dance or attended Franklin High School. We requested interviews with law enforcement officers but they declined due to the ongoing nature of the legal investigation.

Our intent was to be independent, impartial, nonpartisan and thorough. Because it is our purpose to share our findings with the Franklin Community, we held a public hearing and took testimony from many who attended.

The goal of this investigation is not to assign blame. The goal is primarily to provide recommendations that will assist the school community in moving beyond the October 23, 2009 incident. These recommendations do not include taking disciplinary action against staff and students.

We learned about the student body of Franklin High School who demonstrated a degree of responsibility and self-discipline that warrants

commendation. The positive efforts of the students who worked to organize the dance and those who the dance should and must not be minimized by the actions of a few who may have acted inappropriately.

It was our mission to look back at the circumstances surrounding October 23, 2009 and use the information gathered to prepare the District for the future. We hope that the information in this report will result in positive actions that can support the district's planning so that situations of this kind can be avoided. In order to create positive change students, parents, teachers, administrators, school safety officers and law enforcement must unite with a common purpose to sustain unity of purpose for the benefit of the community.

We charge the District with creating a unified system of organization that enables all departments within the District to understand and meet the needs of the students. In addition, appropriately designed programs can help to build better relationships between the community and law enforcement, and with added curriculum that challenge students to resolve conflict in a manner that benefits everyone.

In completing our investigation report we want to thank students, teachers, administrators, parents and security officers who took the time to inform us about the circumstances surrounding that awful event. In the course of our investigation we witnessed some of the emotional damage caused by the incident and the pliability exhibited by many who rose above the ruins that has been left behind.

In this report we offer recommendations with the greatest of humility, many of which have already been stated by students, teachers, security officers and administrators. However, we focused on the recommendations in which we believe are most beneficial, and that can make a difference. Each of us came into this investigation with different opinions of what would be best to avoid repeating such an incident. Each of us had to pause, reflect and sometimes change our minds as we heard the recollection of witnesses and considered their views. We sincerely hope that this investigation report will provide the impetus to move forward and unite all involved for the benefit of the Franklin community.

## PROCESS

In the course of this investigation we interviewed 6 members of the school staff, 8 students and 6 Security Officers who were all present at the Franklin High School Homecoming Dance on October 23, 2009. These interviews were conducted on December 1, December 3 and December 10, 2009. We thank the School Administration of the High School for the use of their conference rooms where staff and student interviews took place. We also thank the parents for permitting their children to meet with us in this information gathering process. Additionally, we thank Reverend DeForest Soares, Pastor of First Baptist Church, for the use of the First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens where an evening meeting of interested and/or involved parents and students who came and offered suggestions and opinions to us.

## FINDINGS OF FACTS

We offer these findings of the facts in support of our recommendations to the Franklin Township Board of Education, the Franklin Township Schools and the Franklin Township Community.

Franklin High School is located in Somerset County, New Jersey and serves a large and culturally diverse student population of approximately 2030 students. This diverse student population consists of African American, Caucasian, Latino, Asian, American Indian and Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders. The School's mission is "to provide excellent educational opportunities for every student in an environment that engenders an appreciation of the values of all students while developing their highest potential in order to be independent and contributing members of a democratic and multicultural society." It is towards this end that the High School Staff and students have their annual Homecoming Dance. This year it was held on October 23, 2009 at the High School from 6:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. in the lobby to the rear of the school building. Adjoining the lobby is the foyer where students entered at the beginning of the dance and exited after the dance was over. The foyer has two

double doors leading into the lobby and four double doors exiting into the parking area. Also, there is a security desk located against the center, rear wall of the foyer.

There were approximately 39 school staff personnel in attendance. This number includes 9 school security staff officer, 30 teachers, two deans of students, and the interim principal. One security officer was part time and ended his duty at 9:00 pm. One dean of students left at 8:45 pm with the understanding that another dean was replacing him. That dean arrived at 8 p.m. and remained on duty until about 11:30 p.m. The 30 teachers consisted of the various class sponsors, the student government sponsor and teachers who had volunteered their services for the evening. We were unable to determine through our interviews the specific assignments of staff for the evening and to who they were to report. The security staff was able to communicate with each other via their radios.

The Franklin High School students and alumni began entering the Homecoming dance at approximately 6:00 p.m. The entrance to the lobby was utilized as the reception area where several desks were set up, each representing one of the grades. Each student who entered the dance had their name checked off against a list of students who had submitted permission slips. At the reception area there were school staff, students and Safety Officers registering students and alumni. Based upon tickets sold it was estimated that the attendance was to be approximately 620 students. Many of the attendees provided various numbers attending the dance; the numbers vary from 300 to 550.

Many attendees stated that at approximately 9:50 pm the lights were turned on. We learned that it was a security officer who was instructed by a staff member to turn on the lights signaling the dance was coming to an end. As the students began their preparation for departure by gathering their personal belongings, the DJ announced the last dance. Some students began to depart the building through the foyer where a Safety Officer was stationed in the foyer. A teacher joined the Safety Officer in the foyer to assist with the exiting of the students. Additionally, a Safety Officer was positioned outside the foyer to assist students who had exited the dance.

During the initial departure of students several attendees indicated that there were two police officers positioned at the two exit doors in the foyer. The weather conditions were extremely rainy and cold with low visibility on the outside.

At approximately 10:00 p.m. a student who had exited the building approached the entrance door to the foyer from the outside to re-enter the building. The police officer that was at the right entrance of the foyer stopped him and stated he could not re-enter. The student requested to enter because he wanted to get his sister who was still in the building. The officer insisted he could not re-enter and shortly thereafter some pushing or shoving occurred between the two and the policeman proceeded to arrest the student. The officer restrained the student and proceeded to handcuff him, at which point another student who had entered the foyer from the right door of the lobby saw the arrest occurring and attempted to intervene. The second police officer who was positioned on the right exit of the foyer proceeded to secure the intervening student. A struggle ensued between the intervening student and the second officer. The initial officer who was involved with the student who was being arrested observed the altercation between the intervening student and the second officer and proceeded to assist the second officer.

While there are various accounts of what occurred between the two officers and the intervening student, it appears that during the struggle the two officers and the student fell to the floor. Upon receiving a call from a safety officer regarding the disturbance in the foyer other safety officers arrived in the foyer and were joined by some staff members to provide crowd control. There were a number of students who were forcing their way into the foyer to observe the confrontation and there were other students who joined the approaching safety officers to observe the confrontation. One attendee stated he assisted safety officers in removing students who were interfering in the arrest of their fellow student.

The sequence of events that followed is that one of the officer sprayed pepper spray in the foyer where the students were present and one of the officers was over heard requesting assistance via his communications device.

Within a short period of time police officers from surrounding areas responded to the scene and the accounts of every attendee was that whatever confusion there was in the foyer had now spread to the waiting area outside the foyer and the parking lot where parents were arriving for their children.

The events that followed occurred through out the parking area where it was stated that police officers indiscriminately pepper sprayed students and parents in an effort to control the situation. Students who observed the parking area described the crowd control by the police "as similar to the 60's without the fire hoses and the dogs." Officers were observed wielding their batons, striking arrestees, shoving people and arresting a number of people.

There were attendees who recalled observing a student thrown across the security desk in the foyer face down handcuffed, while other arrestees were seated in the lobby.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The above stated findings of facts constitute information provided to us by attendees at the Franklin High School Homecoming Dance. We deliberated over this information and have concluded based upon the facts and other interviews of attendees whose information rise above and beyond the event of the Homecoming dance.

In our interviews with administrators and teachers we addressed the planning of the Homecoming dance. We learned that through more detailed planning to include but not limited to exit strategies and coordination prior to the dance may have prevented a situation of this kind from occurring.

The event was planned and coordinated by the senior class sponsor and the student government sponsor. We found no evidence of coordination and planning with the school administration and security staff regarding specific staff assignments, chain of command and emergency procedures. However, the school safety officers in their weekly staff meeting (held each Friday) covered who would be present at the activity. We learned that a building administrator mentioned meeting with the senior class sponsor and student government sponsor three to four times prior to the dance. We were unable to determine what coordination and follow through resulted from these meetings.

The events planning team of administrators, certified teaching staff and school safety officers did not offer written notes or planning manuals for the preparation of the dance. All of the planning was done informally and was not recorded in any form or fashion.

There is a consensus among students and community members that the absence of someone familiar with the students, such as faculty or safety officers, contributed to the confrontation at the door. Many of the individuals interviewed agreed that the initial incident may have been avoided if someone familiar with students was stationed at the exit of the foyer.

Based upon the lack of planning it is understandable but not acceptable that staff members and safety officers abrogated their responsibility at the exit and

permitted officers unfamiliar with the student population to manage the exit of the foyer. We believe that had there been a familiar face to engage the student's request to re-enter the building and retrieve his sister his request may have been addressed with without incident.

The events planning team failed to take into consideration the safety of the students of Franklin High School. The students who were asked to leave the area of the incident were told to leave through the foyer where the arrestees were present. This is another example of the lack of planning that aggravated the students who saw their classmate sprawled across a desk in handcuffs. Staff members should have redirected students to another exit. This would have prevented innocent students from being exposed to pepper spray.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There must be organizational planning and coordination between the lead staff members such as the sponsors, the administration and security staff. To the extent possible students should be involved. This process must be lead by the administration with the ultimate responsibility belonging to the principal. Specifically, staff should have assigned areas or duties clearly delineated before and during the activity. In addition, planning sessions should include emergency procedures, which should be coordinated between building administrators, safety officers and events sponsors.
2. All staff members should have their identification badges clearly visible on their person. School safety officers should be in the appropriate uniform. This recommendation is being made so that in the time of a crisis or an emergency situation or anything else needing school staff's immediate attention, they will be clearly recognized by police and parents. This was a problem for police and staff on October 23, 2009.
3. There should be a clear line of authority established on site with a lead administrator and lead security officer. This must be clearly understood by all staff members present, the school resource officer and with the uniformed police assigned. It is also recommended that the on site lead administrator be equipped with a radio. We also recommend there be an established Resolution Desk occupied by an administrator or a staff member with the ability and authority to address problems at the event, which cannot be resolved by existing policy, protocols or on site personnel.
4. The regular school resource officer (police) or his designee must be present at school events of this nature. We further recommend that the resource officer be involved with the planning meetings held prior to the activity especially the ones dealing with safety and security measures.
5. Assigned uniformed police officers should be made aware of their role as providing assistance, should it become necessary. The lead administrator and or designee will dictate any change in their roles. For instance and as stated in the

2009-2010 Student Code of Conduct, students behaving in a disorderly manner such as exhibiting violence, police will be called to cite that student for his/her actions. We further recommend that in the event of uniformed police being confronted with a concern or problem with a student that whenever possible they yield to school staff on duty.

6. We recommend that school staff be responsible for all entrances and exits for events in order to be the first line of response when students are entering and exiting an event. This should not be a uniform police officers primary duty. Such a practice would make it clear to students that a school staff member will be available to respond to their concerns or questions about procedures.
7. We recommend that however possible the school district work with the police department to ensure that assigned police officers to school events have some training in working with school age individuals during activities such as the homecoming dance. At the very least the assigned officers should be familiar with staff and students and the school itself.
8. We recommend that the school create and establish documented plans of action for events of this nature as with an activities folder that was mentioned by staff. These plans can be updated and change to be passed on to sponsors' of future activities.
9. We recommend that the school staff, parents and students review the inclusion of alumni to homecoming dances. This recommendation is being made because one of the arrested individuals was an alumni and the fact that school staff do not have control over these individuals as they do their students.
10. We recommend a complete review of the process of registering and accounting for what students attended the homecoming dance. This recommendation is the result of the difficulty in ascertaining how many tickets were sold and how many students were in attendance.
11. We recommend that appropriate signage be put in place regarding entering and leaving an event. We further recommend that the school district clearly define what is meant by "once you leave an event you may not re-enter". For instance, does this practice and statement mean during the activity only? It is also recommended

that this information be included in the student handbook or code of conduct document.

12. We recommend that school counseling be provided to students on the very next day following an incident of this magnitude. The Crisis Management Team and its procedures should be activated immediately. This recommendation is the result of the students, parents, staff and media coverage depicting an incident where students were obviously traumatized. We further recommend that the administration work with the student body to reinforce the positive images related to the school community.

13. We recommend that when it becomes necessary to get written statements from students that it is done in a way to ensure that written statements are done individually and not the result of collaboration or suggestion of any kind. We also recommend that any interview or written statement taken from students must have parental consent.

14. We recommend that the superintendent reach out to the police chief and prosecutor to explore ways in which to bring this matter to an amicable conclusion. This recommendation is being made because of the general feeling from community meetings, council meetings, school board meetings, expressions from students and media coverage that the entire township has suffered emotionally. In addition we feel strongly that the superintendent as the educational leader take the lead in this regard because the future of individual students and the school's reputation are at stake.

15. We recommend that the school district incorporate classes regarding conflict resolution for the students and how to respond to law enforcement commands. We feel this is necessary in light of the fact that this incident could have been avoided had the parties acted to resolve the issue rather than to escalate it.

16. We recommend that there be a mandatory orientation for all police officers assigned to school functions. Inclusive in that orientation is sensitivity training.

17. We recommend that the District evaluate and upgrade the existing video surveillance system in an effort to eliminate blind spots and improve video monitoring and reception.

**DOCUMENTS REVIEWED**

Senior Activity Log  
Yearly Event Folder  
Police Reports  
Students Statements  
Staff Statements  
November 5, 2009 Special Board Meeting  
Video of Homecoming, October 23, 2009  
Township Council Meeting October 27, 2009  
Board of Ed Meeting November 19, 2009  
Independent Video of Homecoming Dance  
Various Newspaper Articles  
Homecoming Permission Slips for all grades and alumni  
NJISAA Protocol for Crowd Control  
2009-2010 Student Code of Conduct

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The school shootings at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech University and most certainly the events of September 11, 2001 have forever changed how we think and approach school safety and security. The unfortunate events of October 23, 2009 are certainly not of the magnitude of Columbine, Virginia Tech or the events of September 11 but they are reminders that we, as educators, are responsible for the safety and well being of the children we serve. Therefore, we must embrace and practice procedures that are proactive and preventive in nature. Schools and school districts across the country have responded to this new era of safety and security by being proactive and diligent in the planning and coordination of operational procedures for school activities. Schools and school districts have been proactive with their safety and security procedures and periodically review their effectiveness.

The Franklin Township School District must move beyond approaching safety and security procedures that were used in the past. The homecoming dance incident is a perfect example of how constant updates of procedures are needed. The recommendations from our report clearly outline the need for change in how homecoming dances and other activities are coordinated and planned with a preventive and proactive approach. We must be forever mindful that no one can guarantee complete safety at all times. However, our role must be to provide a safe and healthy environment that is also conducive to the learning process.

We would be remiss if we did not recognize and praise the student body of Franklin High School for the manner in which they have conducted themselves in the aftermath of a situation that has impacted the entire Franklin Community. We were fortunate to have had the opportunity to observe and interact with many students who presented themselves in an articulate and respectful manner worthy of praise from the Franklin Community. It is our hope that you agree that the possible actions of a few in no way minimized the positive actions and contributions of so many others.

Finally, we want to encourage the many dedicated and caring staff members that we interviewed and interacted with to join forces with the student body and community to move beyond October 23, 2009.