

Bedford intensifies investigation into anti-Semitic incidents

More swastikas, posters found at high school

By **Jennifer Fenn Lefferts** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 28, 2014

School and police officials have intensified their investigation into anti-Semitic incidents in Bedford's schools after more swastikas were found and a number of posters with a cross and the initials BHS mysteriously appeared in the high school hallways.

Last fall, hateful graffiti and swastikas were found at Bedford High School and on an elementary school slide.

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“Given how active this perpetrator or perpetrators are adds another sense of urgency,” said Superintendent Jon Sills, who is working closely with Police Chief Robert Bongiorno and Middlesex District Attorney Marion Ryan.

“Someone is really acting out now and feeling the need to rub this in the community's face. There is a feeling that the behavior is a lot more deliberate. It's moving us to want to apply all the resources we have to try to find out who's doing it.”

Meanwhile, officials have taken disciplinary action against some Bedford High School youths after a swastika was found on a school-issued iPad Wednesday.

Sills said it appears that the youths were using a swastika combined with a fish as part of a group symbol they created for use in video game. The youths have been identified, but officials do not believe they are responsible for other anti-Semitic activities in the district in recent months.

“After our investigation into the iPad incident, we believe they are not connected to the other incidents around the community and the school,” Bongiorno said.

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Sills said that while the incident may not be criminal, it does reveal “a disturbing level of ignorance” that must be addressed. He said the youths are facing disciplinary actions and must complete a restorative justice program.

Police are still actively pursuing leads related to the other incidents, including the discovery of a swastika drawn in pencil on a wall outside the teacher’s room March 21 and the posters promoting Christian symbols that were put up in several high school corridors Wednesday.

“Those responsible for these acts will be held accountable for the harm caused to all our town and our faith communities,” Bongiorno said.

In an e-mail sent to parents Thursday, Sills said that while the pairing of a cross with the letters BHS could very well be benign at some other time, it is unlikely that their appearance Wednesday was coincidental.

He said in the e-mail that the high school principal, Henry Turner, addressed the school Thursday morning and “while upholding individuals’ rights to free speech and to promoting pride in one’s culture or religion, he made clear in no uncertain terms that their clandestine appearance and the implication that BHS should be associated with a particular religious symbol are inappropriate and unacceptable.”

The incidents are taking a toll on the community, Sills said, so he is eager for the perpetrator or perpetrators to be found.

“This really needs to calm down so the hard work of addressing the issues of this can do its work without the feeling of crisis dominating,” Sills said.

The superintendent organized a community forum earlier this month in response to some anti-Semitic incidents in the elementary schools, including a conversation among students about a game they called “Jail the Jews.”

Several ideas for improving climate and increasing education came out of the forum, Sills said, including an annual town-wide multicultural festival, providing resources and workshops for parents to help them talk to their children about anti-Semitism and religious differences, and a comparative religions course in the schools.

Sills has scheduled two follow-up meetings, which will be held at 7 p.m. Wednesday in the high school Large Group Instruction room, and at 4 p.m. April 10 in Town Hall.

Sills said he has been open and public about the incidents and will continue to be so.

“It’s very likely that being open may have precipitated some of the additional actions, a payback for being so publicly condemnatory, and I think there’s a cost in that some people are concerned that Bedford is being misunderstood as a place that isn’t open and welcoming,” Sills said. “But the cost of being silent is greater. The cost of being silent would not have provided the opportunity to change behaviors.”

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