



THE Head's LETTER

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FROM YOUR COLLEAGUES

Best Practices for Protecting Children

By **NICK STONEMAN**, President
Shattuck-St. Mary's School, Faribault, MN



We recently hosted a conference focused on Best Practices for Protecting Children and invited all our community organizations serving today's youth—public and private schools, churches, park and rec departments, sports organizations, after-school programs, and so forth.

Shattuck-St. Mary's has committed a great deal of time and resources putting into place the processes, systems, and controls we feel are needed today to look out for the well-being of those under our care. And we have called on not one single entity to do so, but rather, a whole host of experts in the legal profession, social services, law enforcement, and mental health practices. Each has played an important role in helping us piece together a more effective and comprehensive approach, and educated us—throughout the organization—about the breadth and complex nature of the challenge we face in our schools. It was important for us to share our learnings with others.

Our lead speaker and presenter at the conference was consultant Francey Hakes, who also spent her first full day with our students and faculty in both an educative as well as training role. Ms. Hakes served as the first-ever National Coordinator for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction and created the U.S. strategy addressing child sexual exploitation. She has spoken as an expert on child protection at industry, non-profit, and law enforcement events. She was the key organizer for two Department of Justice-sponsored training events attended by more than 3,000 child protection professionals. Preceding all of this, Ms. Hakes was a prosecutor for more than 15 years, first as an Assistant DA specializing in crimes against children, then as an Assistant U.S. Attorney specializing in technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation.

Her depth of experience and her ability to connect with attendees across the age spectrum made for quite a combination. She alarmed, informed, guided, and challenged. She made us realize both how far we have come, and how committed we need to remain. We learned a great deal more about the Internet and all of its pitfalls, about social media and how the seemingly innocuous can lead to the unacceptable, about the stages of grooming and how to catch them early on—or, as a student, how to protect yourself from them, and about the pain and sorrow of victims of abuse.

In speaking with the students after Ms. Hakes's presentation, it was clear that she got their attention. The students felt they gained a new or deeper understanding of "sexting" and its legal consequences for the sender as it qualifies as a form of child pornography, predators masquerading as teenagers through social media, and the telltale signs of grooming. While the topics represented difficult areas to discuss, the appreciation was clear, as was the increased awareness—and therefore each student's preparedness for what he or she could face in the future.

Our faculty got a deeper dive into the travesties of child pornography, the call to duty to play a role in detecting grooming behaviors in the workplace, the necessity of reporting, the pitfalls of social media, and, finally, into the impact abuse has on a child's life. Ms. Hakes, as an authority in the area of protecting children, brought a depth of experience and advice that was, on the one hand, deeply disturbing, but, on the other, painted a necessary picture of a sobering reality.

If there was a wake-up call worthy of sharing, it would be that it is not acceptable to simply read about what has occurred in other schools and hope that it does not happen at "my" school. The reality, sadly, is starkly different. Those who want to abuse children go to where the children can be found. And these people are remarkable both at going undetected, and at using their positional authority with students to their advantage.

While there is no panacea out there, the appreciation for the conference as an educative experience affirmed for us that as independent schools our combined vigilance on behalf of our students is paramount. We need to support each other's efforts, share ideas and approaches, and continually strive to shape and form best practices—not just for one's own school, but for all our schools to consider. Collective wisdom is far more powerful than singular exploration. The time we take to work together, get educated, and make our schools even safer is time well spent. Of all the areas we focus on enhancing, what could be more important?

Shattuck-St. Mary's School, Coed, Day/Boarding, enrolls 475 students in grades 6-12. Mr. Stoneman was appointed headmaster in 2003, and president in 2012.