



HILLSBOROUGH TOWNSHIP PUBLIC SCHOOLS

379 South Branch Road • Hillsborough • NJ • 08844-3443 • (908)431-6600

On May 17, 2019, the Hillsborough High School senior prom was held and was intended to be a magical and memorable night for all of the prom-goers. For one group of students with special needs, however, an incredible evening of dining and dancing ended earlier than planned and with disappointment.

The Hillsborough Township Board of Education is proud of its commitment to, and the good work of, its staff in ensuring an excellent and non-discriminatory educational environment for all students, including those with disabilities. It values and promotes the education of students with disabilities in varied ways, beginning with student-centered and individualized educational programs and continuing through extracurricular experiences that support the students' interests, build a connection to the high school, and help with social-emotional development. Programs include Integrated Cheer, Integrated Track, clubs, and other activities throughout the school year, in addition to those offered to all students such as the prom. The district's goal for students in the special education program matches the goal for students in the general education program -- to create an environment where students can come to school to learn, forge friendships, grow personally and academically, and enjoy every experience that defines high school.

After the Hillsborough High School senior prom, some students with disabilities and their families communicated to district administration and the Board of Education their disappointment in those students' concluding experience at this milestone event. More specifically, the Board received communications about allegations that certain students with disabilities, largely those sharing a single limousine, were required to leave the senior prom early. Once this matter was brought to the Superintendent's attention, he directed administrative staff members to commence an immediate investigation into the incident. That thorough and extensive investigation included interviews of numerous individuals, including staff, students, parents, and third-party service providers who witnessed or were part of the interactions in question from that evening, as well as a review of correspondence from the parents of various students, the Child Study Team, and the instructional assistants. As a result of that investigation, the administration concluded that while certain parents of students with disabilities requested an early dismissal from the prom, these students were erroneously dismissed earlier than requested and contrary to their wishes to remain. The Board agrees that this resulted in an unacceptable

scenario leaving students and their families with the impression that they could not stay until the end of the prom, which should not have happened. The senior prom began at 7:00 PM and ended at 11:30 PM. The earliest departure time for students who did not want to stay until the end was 11:00 PM, and limousines were not permitted to arrive earlier than 11:15 PM to allow a staggered exit to avoid traffic jams for the many student drivers, limousines, and party buses. Communications with some of the parents of students with special needs indicated that the limo for this group would arrive at 11:00 PM in keeping with the past practice of allowing the students with special needs to leave fifteen minutes early to avoid the crush as the majority other prom-goers, most of whom choose to leave at 11:00 PM, also depart. However, this group left at 10:45 PM and were not present for the full coronation of the king and queen or their traditional dance.

The Board and the administration sympathize with the affected students and their families. During the course of the investigation, the administrators apologized in person to the students and parents with whom they met or communicated, and, as the investigation drew to a close, the principal sent a letter to all of the parents last week that reiterated this apology and the school's staunch belief that their children deserved better, as well as offered a special activity to those students to remind them that they are valued members of the school family. The Board of Education offers its sincerest apology, as well.

While the Board cannot comment on any personnel matters, as school district staff members have a right to confidentiality under New Jersey law, the Board wishes to make it clear that the administration is taking steps to ensure that this type of error will not happen again. The Board firmly expects that all students receive equal opportunities to participate in the district's educational program and extracurricular activities, and its policies and practices reflect a commitment to that belief. However, the students' early dismissal from the prom is not reflective of those expectations, but was, instead, an unfortunate mistake with heartbreaking ramifications.

The Board believes that this regrettable occurrence, which was hurtful to those students and families, should not reflect negatively on the hundreds of teachers, aides, and administrators who care deeply for the district's special needs students, and who have done so for many, many years. The Board again apologizes for these students' earlier-than-anticipated dismissal from the senior prom, and sincerely hopes that the remainder of the school year for these students will be filled with the positive and enriching educational and extracurricular experiences that they truly deserve.