



September 22, 2025

Dr. Catherine Stephens
Director of Schools

Board of Education

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Dr. Monica Blake-Beasley

Re: Letter of reprimand

Dear Dr. Blake-Beasley:

This letter will confirm the substance of our meeting on September 18, 2025, regarding a recent social media post in which you used grossly unprofessional language. As I stated, such language is unbecoming to any member of the teaching profession. Accordingly, I am formally reprimanding you for your misconduct.

Background

On the evening of Friday, September 12, 2025, you requested to speak with me to share your concern that a member of the community had misinterpreted your "hearting" of another person's social media post regarding the assassination of Charlie Kirk, which we did at halftime of the football game in White County. The post you "hearted", on its face, described the late Mr. Kirk as hateful, and the author stated that she had no empathy for his untimely death. Within this post, however, the author also expressed regret for gun violence in general. You explained to me that this was the aspect of the post that you had "hearted."

I advised you that social media can be an imprecise vehicle of communication. Since you had "hearted" the entire post, anyone seeing it would have assumed that you shared *all* the author's views. By having communicated poorly, you had created an impression that was likely to harm your standing in the community. You expressed understanding and said you would handle the matter.

During this conversation, however, you did not share with me, after being asked if there were any other posts, that you had made your own separate social media post referencing Mr. Kirk's assassination. In this post, you referred to Mr. Kirk's support of the Second Amendment and suggested it was ironic that he had been killed. Then, you inserted an acronym, FAFO, which stands for "f*** around and find out." I did not find out about this post until I began receiving complaints on Saturday, September 13.

Upon receipt of these complaints, I began assessing your actions, their implications upon your potential fitness to teach, and their effect on the school environment. On Monday, September 15, I asked your principal, Dr. Greg English, to pose five questions to you:

- Whether your post conflicts with the curricular goals of your classes;
- Whether your post reflects vigilantism versus the rule of law;
- Whether your post reflects poorly on your professional ethics and impartiality as an educator;
- Whether your post has impacted the learning environment in your classroom; and
- Why you failed to mention this second post to me on Friday, September 12.

As you reflected upon these questions in anticipation of our meeting, I conducted my own investigation; I reviewed the emails, notes from phoned complaints, and written complaints we had received. And between Monday, September 15, and Thursday, September 18, I spoke at length with Dr. English.

Legal and Professional Considerations

At least since the 1960s, the United States Supreme Court has held that teachers do not lose their First Amendment right to speak on matters of public concern simply because they work for a public school system. That said, in its 1968 decision in *Pickering v. Board of Ed.*, the Court also recognized that a teacher's right to speak must be balanced against the school system's interest in upholding the values of the education profession and maintaining an effective learning environment.

This balancing test requires a careful analysis of the speech's context. Comments that might be acceptable on the town square might be inappropriate in the classroom. On the square, a teacher may have a degree of anonymity, and he or she would clearly not represent the school system. On the other hand, in the classroom, the teacher is the actual voice of the school board, paid to convey the approved curriculum. But what happens when someone connects the teacher's speech on the square to her work in the classroom?

As an educator, you are governed by the Teacher's Code of Ethics, found in *Tenn. Code Ann.* § 49-5-1001 and following. In Section 1004, which addresses a teacher's duty to the profession, the Code states that "educators shall conduct themselves in a manner that preserves the dignity and integrity of the education profession."

Similarly, as an employee of Tullahoma City Schools, you are governed by Board Policy No. 5.611. The preamble of this Policy states that, "an effective educational program requires the services of men and women of integrity, high ideals, and human understanding. To maintain and promote these essentials, all employees are expected to maintain high standards in their school relationships."

More specifically to your situation, Board Policy No. 4.406 also addresses a teacher's use of the internet on her own time. This Policy states in material part that, "district staff who have a presence on social networking websites are prohibited from posting data, documents, photographs, or inappropriate information that is likely to create a material and substantial disruption of classroom activity."

Read together, Tennessee law and Board policy remind teachers that they have a duty to the profession to carry themselves with dignity, to demonstrate professionalism, and to exercise sound judgment. This duty extends to their off-duty use of social media. Of course, not every off-duty,

off-campus misstep will affect a teacher's professional credibility, but those that do may necessitate a response from the school system. The nature of that response must be in proportion to the teacher's actions.

Analysis

In your case, your social media post certainly addresses several matters of public concern – the assassination of a notable political figure, his position on the Second Amendment, and gun violence. Speech like this ordinarily enjoys the highest level of protection under First Amendment law.

Furthermore, you appear to have been speaking as a private citizen rather than as a teacher. Your social media profile does not readily identify you as a teacher in Tullahoma City Schools, and you do not permit any students to follow you. You made your post off-duty and off-campus, and your post does not attempt to speak from your perspective as an educator.

Even so, your speech carried on the winds of the internet from the virtual town square back to the school environment. As you are aware, many people have voiced serious concerns regarding your continued fitness to teach. As the Director of Tullahoma City Schools, I have taken these concerns seriously, and I have investigated them carefully.

What I have learned, however, is that there have been relatively few complaints from parents or students within Tullahoma High School, and there have been no complaints from students or parents of students in your classes. Dr. English also tells me that he does not believe your comments have had any impact on the overall school environment. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, therefore, I must conclude that your speech has not substantially impacted your ability to command the respect of your students or your fitness to teach.

That is not to say, however, that your word choice was acceptable. During our meeting, we dwelt on your use of the phrase "f*** around and find out." I asked you to ponder the vulgarity of the word you had used, f***, albeit in an abbreviated form. I asked you to consider whether that word, f***, reflected the dignity of our profession. I asked you to consider, on a scale of 1 (unprofessional)-10 (highly professional), how professional it was for you to use the word f*** knowing that someone following you would know that you are an educator.

To your credit, you rated your word choice a "1" and acknowledged that it was unprofessional and vulgar. You accepted that you had not conducted yourself in a way that preserved the dignity of the profession. You realized that, had you chosen a different way to express the same thoughts, you would not have created the same concerns about your professionalism.

Based upon our lengthy meeting and the depth of our discussion, I am satisfied that you understand how ill-considered your word choice was and how the use of f*** damaged your credibility as a professional. I also believe you understand my expectations for your continued employment in Tullahoma City Schools: you will always conduct yourself in a manner that befits an educator; you will model civility; and you will elevate, not denigrate, the public perception of the profession.

If you have any questions regarding my expectations, you should bring them to my immediate attention. If I do not hear from you, I will assume that you fully understand my expectations and are committed to adhering to them. If you demonstrate any further lapses in professional judgment, I will seek appropriate discipline up to and including termination.

This reprimand will remain in your permanent file. If you wish to respond to this reprimand, you must do so in writing within ten days of today. If you submit a response, I will have it included in your personnel file along with this reprimand.

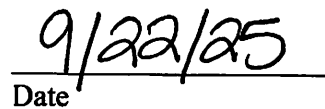
Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Catherine Stephens", written over the word "Respectfully,".

Dr. Catherine Stephens
Director of Schools

c: HR/Personnel File, Principal

My signature below indicates I have received a copy of this letter of reprimand.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "MBZ", written over a horizontal line.
SignatureA handwritten date "9/22/25" in black ink, written over a horizontal line.
Date