

ROCKETSHIP PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Open letter regarding student safety incident at Rocketship Rise Academy November 5, 2019

On October 11, 2019, our approach to community building and school safety was put to the test at Rocketship Rise Academy at 2335 Reynolds Place SE, Washington, DC.

On a parent conference day when there was no school, our after-school provider was on campus providing care for a group of students. A parent entered the building to attend a teacher conference and another man followed closely behind her. Our Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) resource officer was at the front door and allowed the man to enter the school. The man told our MPD officer that he was with the woman who entered just before him and that she was his baby's mother. The man was allowed to enter the school without an ID check. When school is in session, our policy is to enforce ID checks for all adults entering our school building at all times.

The man then went to the gym and started playing basketball with a few students in the afterschool program operated by SpringBoard Education. He convinced two students to leave with him. SpringBoard did not follow dismissal protocol and the man was allowed to exit the gym with two students. He then made his way to the front doors. As he was leaving the school, the Office Manager at Rise Academy noticed that this individual was not the parent of these two students. She acted fast and approached the man attempting to leave with two of our students.

Rise Academy's Office Manager confronted the individual, asked for identification, called for security, and ensured that our students did not leave her sight. Our MPD resource officer took over from there. He questioned the man and determined something was amiss. He called for backup, and the man was arrested on an outstanding warrant.

After the police conducted their investigation, we learned that the man is a registered sex offender who was on probation for an attempted kidnapping of a child in September 2018. We later learned that the federal agency tasked with monitoring sex offenders on probation did not know his whereabouts since September 11, 2019.

Our front office team at Rise Academy prevented an unthinkable tragedy. This incident is deeply troubling, but it also affirms why our focus on parent engagement allows us to better serve and protect our students. The team at Rise Academy has strong relationships with the families we serve. This close connection with our families is what allowed our front office staff to act quickly, protect our students, and ultimately lead to the arrest of this individual.



Ward 8 Constituent Services

· 5 hrs ·

ROCKETSHIP PUBLIC SCHOOLS

But mistakes were made and we take full responsibility for our failure to enforce our rigorous safety protocols on campus this day when school was not in session yet students were on site under the care of a third party provider.

The school leaders at Rocketship Rise Academy and the Regional Leadership Team for Rocketship DC held a community meeting for all parents and caretakers at Rocketship Rise Academy on the morning of October 31, 2019. Together, we agreed on the following actions to improve campus security while still welcoming our parents on campus:

- We terminated our contract with our after-school provider, SpringBoard Education, by mutual agreement. SpringBoard service on campus will end on November 8, 2019.
- Our parents made clear that they depend on after-school care for their students. There are limited options for quality afterschool providers that can provide onsite care in DC. Rocketship Rise Academy will begin offering its own after-school care to students effective November 11, 2019. All current families enrolled in after-school care will continue to receive services. There will be no change in fees for the program.
- Rocketship is now enforcing mandatory ID checks for all adults entering our school building at all times - including when school is not in session as occurred in this incident.
- Rocketship Rise is adding an additional layer of security to campus. In addition to the MPD resource officer we have on site, we hired LGC security to provide another layer of campus security. LGC security service at Rise Academy started on Monday, November 4.

We also take full responsibility for failing to enforce our communication protocols following a safety incident on our campus. We expect our school leaders to immediately inform staff and network leadership when a safety incident occurs on campus. Families should be notified within 24 hours of the incident occurring. Given the severity of this incident, we also should have informed our authorizer, the DC Public Charter School Board, and community stakeholders. The team at Rise Academy erred on the side of confidentiality until their internal investigation and police investigation was complete and they had clear facts to inform our community. This was a significant failure in judgment. Our parents and stakeholders deserve to be promptly informed about school safety incidents, including those that occur when school is not in session.

The circumstances of this incident did not fit neatly into established communication practices at Rise Academy. There was no school on this day. Adults were flowing in and out of the building for parent teacher conferences. Students on campus were under the care of a third party provider. But make no mistake, this was a school safety incident and the school leadership team at Rocketship Rise Academy did not follow our communication protocols. All Rocketship schools have clear communication protocols to follow in response to a school safety incident. Rocketship



Ward 8 Constituent Services

· 5 hrs ·

ROCKETSHIP PUBLIC SCHOOLS

DC Regional Leadership met with the team at Rise Academy last week to review communication protocols and we scheduled additional trainings for all our school leaders on this topic this month.

The mother of these two boys did the right thing when she testified about concerns for her sons' safety during the D.C. Public Charter School Board meeting last week. She was not satisfied by the response of school leaders at Rise Academy, so she brought her serious concerns to the government agency responsible for oversight of her school. Our focus on parent engagement at Rocketship is designed to enable parents to become champions of their children's education and to hold leaders accountable to ensuring high-quality public schools thrive in their community. We are grateful that the mother of these two boys used the power of her voice to hold us accountable.

We fully acknowledge that on the day of this incident and the days that followed, we failed to meet the standard of excellence that we hold ourselves to. But this moment does not define Rocketship Rise Academy. Rise Academy is delivering transformational outcomes for students in one of the most underserved communities in the District. Over 80% of students at Rise Academy are classified as at-risk—one of the highest at-risk populations in the District. Rocketship Rise Academy has been recognized each year it has been eligible as a Bold Performance School by EmpowerK12 for having achievement rates dramatically higher than similar schools. The gains our students are making, year-after-year, are advancing the collective movement to improve educational equity across our great city.

As we move forward and implement additional measures for campus security we remain committed to welcoming our parents inside *their* school at all times. The transformational gains we realize for our students is due in large part to the partnership we form with our families. And that partnership is ultimately what enabled our front office staff to prevent a tragedy from happening on our campus.

As always, we are humbled by the trust our parents place in us to serve and protect their students.

Sincerely,



Joyanna Smith
Regional Director, Washington DC
Rocketship Public Schools



Ward 8 Constituent Services

· 6 hrs ·



Screenshot

