Bill Rice, principal of Fairfield High School, is concerned about a recent spike in student misbehavior. On the televised morning announcements of Jan. 29, Rice made a short speech addressing such concerns, imploring Fairfield students to “be better.”

Two days later, in a press conference with Tribal Tribune reporters, he welcomed the opportunity to discuss in greater depth some
issues facing his school and courses of action that can be taken to guarantee a secure and inviting atmosphere for students and staff alike to learn and work.

“It’s what I think about every day when I’m driving to school, like, ‘How can I ensure a safe, warm, welcoming environment for students?’” Rice said.

The following is the transcript of the interview conducted with Rice:

Q: What is the message you want to get out to students and parents in regard to the safety of the students?

(Safety’s) all of our responsibility. I think that was the purpose of that announcement the other day. We can say that it’s a small percentage doing dumb and silly things, things we wouldn’t dream of doing, but it’s all of our responsibility to help the climate and the culture of the building.

My disappointment, from what I’ve seen recently, is the willingness for everyone to hype it, get excited by it, run toward it, and videotape it (things like fights). If all of us are collectively saying, “Well, that’s not what we are going to be a part of,” if we don’t allow it to have an audience, if we let our voices be heard and say, “That’s not what we want Fairfield High School to be about,” I think we can stop a lot of it.

I think we can also stop a lot of it by simply speaking and treating each other like human beings and saying, “I’m hearing this is going to go on.” It’s that “see something-say something” type attitude. I (as a student) am not okay with violence, I’m not okay with kids destroying bathrooms like we’ve seen this year (and), I’m not okay with this silly kind of behavior, so when I hear about it, I’m going to talk to people about it. I’m going to let my voice be heard because I don’t want this building to look like that.

Q: How long have you been in an administrative role in Fairfield, and throughout your career?

This is my fourth year as the high school principal here. Before Fairfield, seven years as an assistant principal at Mason High School, and, before that, two years as an assistant principal at Pleasant Run Middle School in the Northwest Local School District. That equals 13 total years in administration.

Q: You mentioned in your speech issues with backpacks, tardies, skipping, and fights … is one more important than the other to you?

Overall, you worry about building safety in terms of violence, so it’s not fair to pick one thing. Societal violence we see at movie
theaters, shopping malls, churches, places of worship. Anything can lead to violence. I firmly believe that when kids come to school and they’re worried about things, if they’re worried about what someone might say or might do, if they’re worried about where their next meal was going to come from, if they’re worried about domestic relationships at home, (then) they’re not going to be able to concentrate and learn the content that we are expecting them to. So for me, one of my main roles is to remove those barriers, get resources for kids that need resources, to get help for kids that need help, (and) to create that safe welcoming environment, nurturing environment and then we can educate. We can’t educate if we can’t figure out all of the rest of that stuff.

**Q: Do the views differ among the administration?**

I don’t think so. I think we are pretty united as an admin team.

**Q: What do you feel the response has been from the students on your morning speech? We saw people on social media say that you speaking out on the announcements was a “nice try,” but it wasn’t going to change anything.**

I’ve heard a lot of that. Within 5 minutes (after the announcement speech), someone let their opinion be known on Snapchat, so I had a conversation with that student because he used some inappropriate language directed toward me. There is some of that (doubt), but I’ve also had a dozen students who have come up to me and said, “Thank you for that message, we want to help,” and I’ve had kids come to me who are willing to talk about things they are worried about with their friends.

I’m not naive enough to think that I can go on a loudspeaker or TV and cure all of our ills. It was just to a point that, when I said in my message, “This keeps me up at night,” that was honest-to-goodness truth.

This is what I chose as a profession; somebody didn’t just wake up one day and hand me this. This is what I said I want to do, so I do take behaviors like that personally. I don’t understand why we would consciously want to represent ourselves that way. I will never understand that. I will never understand the willingness (to destroy; for example,) before the holidays where we had bathrooms that were destroyed. I can’t get that into my mind, like, “Why would we want to do stuff like that?”

Yes, the boiling point was Tuesday when we had a couple altercations, and I said, “You know what? Sometimes in a large school, it’s really difficult for everybody to know who I am and what my role is. This is one of those times where I step out of my comfort zone and we’re going to do a full-school announcement and we’re just going to talk and we’re going to try to look kids in
the eye and say it’s not acceptable, we have to be better than that."

Q: What can the students do to help?

Well, I think No. 1 in society – and I keep saying this – we celebrate stupidity a lot. When you think about all the dumb things you see that go viral, you know, people that become Internet famous, and you look back on it, you’re probably sitting there looking at it yourself, as an individual, going “I would never do something like that.”

I think this building is a microcosm of that. We shouldn’t celebrate these things, I’m sorry but people who behave this way should be outcasts. They should not be the most popular kids in the school. We should not be retweeting videos of these things. We should not be celebrating with somebody who writes something ridiculous on a wall in a bathroom. That shouldn’t be what we want to be a part of.

So, to me, like I said in the announcements, “There are twenty-four hundred (students), there are a hundred and fifty-ish staff members. Twenty-four hundred … one hundred and fifty: Who holds the power in the building? You guys, collectively. I firmly believe this, you guys collectively can change the culture in a day here. You can decide what kind of building you want and change it – today – by doing what you are supposed to be doing, by having open conversations with people, by holding each other accountable.

You know who your friends are that make bad decisions. Are you that friend who says, “Are you sure you want to do that?” You know who your friends are on a Friday night who are going to do something dumb. Are you that friend who says, “Why don’t you come over and hang out at my house rather than doing that?” That’s how you change the culture.

Q: Why do you think these issues have skyrocketed this year?

That’s a great question. Everybody wants to blame the sophomore class. I’m tired of hearing that. I heard it all last year … “just wait for this class.” That’s a cop-out, to me. So I don’t know what the rise is. We look at our statistical data. We look at discipline and who we suspend and how many we suspend and all of those sorts of things, and there is no doubt that this year we are up in all of those categories – and that bothers me greatly.

I know what statistics say about the school-to-prison pipeline for students who are suspended. The stats are out there and that bothers me greatly; I take suspending a
kid extremely serious … it’s the last resort. I think I could win a Nobel Peace Prize if I could answer that question. Again, I think we are just a microcosm of what’s going on in a lot of schools and what’s going on in society, but I’m the type of person who is not okay with just saying, “That’s how it is.”

Q: Do you feel that the ban on bookbags has increased safety at the school?

We looked at it like this: We were the only school not enforcing our no-backpacks rule, the only one. We surveyed all of our neighbors, all of our GMC schools, and we were the only ones. There are some schools that have gone to the extreme that they’re wanding every other student as they enter in the morning; I’m not ready to go there. But I don’t ever want to be on an island where I’m the only guy doing something one way, so that was part of the decision (to ban bookbags).

But do I think, in the end, that when a kid is going to make a bad decision, that me taking away his bookbag is going to change that decision? Probably not. That’s just the honest truth. Probably not. I think if you look at the history of school shootings, those schools probably didn’t allow backpacks. But, in the end, is it a step to a safer school? I do believe so.

Q: Do you feel that the ban on backpacks could be the reason that there were a lot more tardies in the first semester?

No. I really don’t. We have got great communication with a lot of our kids. (If the kids) I would identify as my student leaders — the kids who are really engaged in everything — if I had those guys come forward and say, “I physically can’t get to class on time and this is why,” maybe I would re-look at (banning bookbags). But those who are tardy? (They) have been tardy, and will be tardy, and will continue to be tardy.

The blatant skips of classes is what has exponentially gone up (in number) this year and there doesn’t seem like there is a consequence that changes that behavior. We’ve tried Saturday Schools versus ISDs, ISDs versus out-of-school suspensions. Those who skip, (though,) come back from a consequence and skip again.

Q: Do you feel that with the students who skip, are their parents involved or even know what is happening?

They certainly know it’s happening because we communicate with parents for student consequences. Society has changed so much. The family structure is different.

FHS students are not allowed to take bookbags into classrooms; instead they must keep them in their lockers until it is time to go home. The enforcement of this policy has been a major source of both complaints and praise during the 2019-20 school year.
The overwhelming majority of families have both parents who are working now, whereas in my generation, the mother almost always stayed home. That changes a family. When folks have to work, they have to work, and I get that. Families are just torn in different directions now.

If I would have ever dreamed of skipping, my mom would’ve been up there to whoop me in front of everybody. Well, she didn’t have a job, she chose to stay home. Sometimes you’ll hear adults say, “Well, that the parent isn’t engaged with what’s going on with the kid.” (But) maybe they just physically can’t; they have a job that they cannot miss because they have to put food on the table for their family, because they have to have electricity in the house. So I don’t want to point the finger at the families for everything. Could some parents be more engaged? Absolutely. But I don’t think that’s the No. 1 reason.

Q: How big of a part do you think social media has played?

In terms of everything that is going on, I think social media is a lot of our ills. I mean we didn’t have any of this when I was in high school. None of it. The Internet was just coming in to play as I graduated high school, so I can’t imagine the pressures that are felt by kids nowadays.

Bullying was absolutely around when I was a kid. Absolutely. One hundred percent. There was no doubt I was bullied. The difference was, when I got off the bus, at three o’clock in the afternoon, I didn’t have to deal with that guy again until the next day. Your life now is with a phone that literally lays in the bed with you at night and is (with you) 24 hours a day, seven days a week. So that guy who chooses to be a jerk to you, can continue to be a jerk to you … Friday night, Saturday morning, Sunday morning, Wednesday night when you’re sleeping … you know what I mean?

So, technology, social media, whatever you want to call it – just that constant “I have to be wired in to something” – I think is changing the way our brains are wired. I think it’s changing a lot of what we see, everywhere, not just schools, but everywhere. Just walk into a restaurant and see who’s talking as a family versus who’s on their phones or eating dinner. It’s those kind of little things. We always sat around the dinner table (and) I always sat across from my dad. For 18 years he asked me, “How was your day?” And I was a typical teenager: “It was fine.” “What do you mean it was fine, what did you do?” “Ah, nothing.” “What do you mean nothing?” There was always that.

I don’t think we see that anymore. The TV’s on; the phones at the dinner table; we’re not at the dinner table; we are sitting on the couch. Our lives are too busy, I don’t know what social media does; (it’s) technology versus the crazy lives we live now.

Q: What motivated you to become a principal and do you still find that motivation this year?
Good question. So just a little bit of background about me: Every man in my family, until me, was an engineer. When I say every, I mean every. My grandfather’s father, uncles, all of them engineers. They all were engineers for the Big Three, so I grew up just north of Detroit. One side of the family worked for GM, General Motors. The other side of the family worked for Chrysler. They all – all of them – rose to some sort of leadership position, whether they were managers, whether they were in finances, or project managers. So leadership has always been a part of my family.

I pretended to be an engineering student for a number of years before I decided I’d had enough of math. I took a lot of history classes because I’ve always loved history and it wasn’t until very late in my education that I went in the direction of teaching. I didn’t know when I became a teacher that in five years I’d be an assistant principal. I thought I would teach for a number of years. I think I went a lot faster than what was ever designed.

But why did I choose to go into administration? I love the pace of this job. It’s relentless. There’s never a minute during the day that we don’t have something going on as an administration, ever.

I don’t get a plan bell. It’s constant. From the moment I get here – and I get here really early, like quarter to six every morning – until the moment I go home, it’s nonstop. I like that, I don’t want to be bored, I don’t have time. I like the idea that you never really know what the day is going to hold.

So your second part of your question, this week is hard … it’s really the last six weeks have been hard. I’ve got three little guys at home – three little boys – and I didn’t get home until seven o’clock on Monday and Tuesday and there is a lot of time where I’m like, “Why in the world am I not spending time with my family?” I just have that self-reflection: Do I care more about what’s going on at Fairfield High School with kids that aren’t my kids? Getting home at seven o’clock at night and not seeing my kids but for ten minutes to put them to bed?

So earlier this week I was thinking a lot about that. Like what in the world am I doing? Is it easier to just have a job where I am guaranteed to be done by four o’clock every day? So, yeah, you have those moments, but I think you have those moments in any career. I don’t think there is one career that is always roses. There’s pressures and struggles with everything.
Q: Do you think that students would skip less often if every teacher took attendance every period?

Let me take that a little bit further. I think the No. 1 thing that we can do as adults in this building is to form better relationships with kids. I truly believe that if the relationships were better, many of these things would be better – including skips. If you think about it, if a kid has a great relationship with an adult, are they going to skip that class? If they truly enjoy what that content is and enjoy that relationship they have with that adult and feel valued in that classroom? So, yes, taking attendance is a component of it, but, to me, taking attendance is the reaction after the skip has already taken place. I take attendance and it’s just, “Oh yeah, that person skipped. Now I can hold them accountable.” I would rather us invest in everything before that, I want a kid who wants to come into school and be like, “I want to be there; if I’m not there, I’m missing out.”

There will always be kids who skip, but think about what the building would look like if every kid thinks, “I can’t miss today, because if I miss, I miss this, and I can’t … it’s not worth it to me.” That’s when you know you’ve got something good going on.

Q: Do you think there is a specific reason there has been an increase of fights at school?

Maybe I could win a Nobel Peace Prize if I could figure out why teenagers want to hurt each other. I think it’s all of the factors we’ve talked about. I think it’s a societal issue; I think social media and technology plays into it. I think part of it is, unfortunately, our culture – but we have a say in that. I firmly believe that. I don’t think there is one thing you can say is if I remove this variable, (fighting) stops. I think that’s too easy of a scenario.

One focus for Bill Rice and the FHS staff is to build student-teacher relationships to help drastically reduce the number of tardies and skipped classes. Statistics show that there were more than 3,300 combined skips and tardies in the first semester alone.
I stress to the staff all of the time. Be out in the halls, be talking to kids, take five minutes at the beginning of the bell and just talk to people.

I consider this to be a season; we’re going to get past this, and things will be better. Who knows, maybe we’ll get a snow day, give us all a little bit of a break. But when you face rocky times, you get back to, in my opinion, what your core values are. You do some inner soul-searching and you think back to, “OK, why did I get into this job, what is it that I truly believe in with leadership, what is it I truly believe in with leading human beings?” We don’t build widgets. I don’t build a thing. We build humans. So get back to your core values.

How do you do that? You do that by forming relationships, by having open and honest conversations. Be inviting. I’ve tried really hard this week to be out in the halls and talking to kids and telling them, “Come on in my office, let’s talk about these things you’re seeing.” Those are the things that I think change (environments).

Q: How do you feel that the fighting impacts the students who aren’t in them and avoid them?

To me, I would imagine that (fights) rattle people. I will never understand the want to harm another human being. There is nothing anyone in this building can say to me – you can say whatever you want to me – and there is nothing that is going to get me to want to fight you, because I’m going to walk away and I’m going to laugh and say, “OK, I guess I’m not getting a Christmas card from that person.”

So I would think when you see instances of violence, you are rattled your core. I hope you would be. I hope as a society that we aren’t numb to it; “Oh, there was another fight.” I would hope we would be like, “What in the world are we seeing?” So I would imagine a large percentage of our students are extremely bothered by it, disgusted by it.

Q: Why, in the last few weeks, have kids been fighting after school and why were they sent outside?

There was one fight. It had the potential to spill into something much, much bigger. We were able to contain it quickly. Truthfully, it wasn’t even much of a fight, because we were there so quickly. But there were so many kids there in such little time, and what we saw were groups of folks who were running in other areas of the building and we were afraid that it might ignite again. So it was easier for us to say, “OK, we’re done for the day, time for everybody to go home. Give us an opportunity to investigate it. Everybody’s gotta’ go.”

There was only once where we did that. Tuesday, people thought we were saying that, but we weren’t, and I know a lot of the
staff took it upon themselves, and, rightly so, when they saw large groups of kids who were still hyping (fights), say it’s time to go. There was no mandate. The only mandate came when I made that announcement.

Q: Have you considered moving earlier the time that all students, except those in extra-curriculars, have to be out of the building by?

We haven’t considered that. We are still working with parents who are trying hard to get here to pick their kids up. There are legitimate reasons why kids need to stay.

But again, it’s one of those things where you have to balance everything. How much are we going to upset the apple cart for less than 1 percent of the population? When 99.9 percent of us are doing what is right, I’m not going to punish (them) because we’ve got a group of folks going bonkers right now. If I were to do something like that, it might just shift the problem outside, like they could go to the Jungle Jim’s parking lot and fight, like we’ve had in prior years.

That’s just kind of shifting the problem. I’d rather work with the parents so they can get here as best as they can – at 2:45, 3 o’clock – and pick their kids up. We’ve put more resources in the cafeteria for supervision. Those are the things that I’m trying to do.

Q: How much responsibility do you think we should put on the teachers for the way the students are behaving at school?

We’re having those reflective conversations. We have what’s called a Building Leadership Team. There are about 25 teachers and staff a part of this, and we have those conversations in those meetings. We’ve done some book studies before, as a staff, that talks about positive relationship-building with kids. Reflective conversations are hard and it’s not like I can just say, “Change this one thing,” so a lot of that focus on change comes to the adults in that situation … myself included.

Q: Is there anything you want to add?

I just think collectively, the adults – from the teachers to the custodians to the EAs – and the kids – from your valedictorian to your athlete and everyone in between – we all have to be on the same page if we want to change.

I think – and I hope – we all want to change. We want to be reflective of who we are as a school and as a community.

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