

## 'School threat' offers opportunity to reflect



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I've been thinking a lot about last month's rumor of a threat against Anacortes High School – and what we can learn from it.

Social media lit up in mid-December with references to the alleged threat, and school administrators' email inboxes overflowed

with messages and questions. We cancelled school to investigate.

The investigation, conducted with the Anacortes Police Department, found that there was no threat. The whole thing had zero basis. There was never any implied harm or ill will by anyone against the school or against students.

Even after we clarified that there was no threat, some students and parents couldn't believe it. How could it be false when there was so much community buzz and so many references to it online? Surely, there must be something there?

### Rumor mill

The story doesn't end there. A truly unfortunate consequence of the incident is that as the rumor spread, names were attached to the supposed threat. In a number of cases, parents spread the names after hearing rumors from their children.

Several AHS students were called out as potential school shooters. The names – and

in one case a student photo – spread on social media. You can imagine the dismay such actions brought to the accused individuals and their families.

So what's going on here?

First, I think the issue took off because it played on our fears. As parents, our duty is to keep our children safe. Anything that imperils our children's well-being immediately gets our full attention.

Second, the issue was tailor made for Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. While social media certainly has its strengths, one of the downsides is the ease with which information is passed along without attribution. This is why cyber bullying has become such a pervasive problem in our country. The dramatic nature of this particular rumor probably attracted students and parents who otherwise may have been more discerning.

### Media consumption

In many ways, this case underscores the critical importance of being a careful consumer of information. And that's a huge part of a K-12 education today. One of the prominent learning standards that cuts across subject areas and grade levels is using evidence to support claims.

In other words, how do we know what we know?

It's at the heart of critical thinking.

The recent U.S. election – with an increase in "fake news" – and the growth of social media add urgency to this need for careful media consumption and communication.

Facebook reports having more than 1.6 bil-

lion users worldwide. A Pew Research study found that 79 percent of online Americans use Facebook. And a YouGov survey reported by BBC news found that 48 percent of Americans get their news from social media compared to a news website.

We have to be vigilant about what we post and read online – and how we know what we know.

### Good citizenship

We also have to resist the temptation to gossip. It can be very alluring to think that we have the inside scoop on a juicy topic.

Without good judgment, we fall prey to innuendo, falsehoods and finger-pointing. Arthur Miller explored this in his classic play, *The Crucible*. Based on the Salem Witch Trials – and an allegory for the McCarthy-era "red scare" politics – rumors and unfounded accusations in the 1690s led to the death of 20 alleged witches. The state of Massachusetts later condemned the trials for a lack of evidence in the prosecutions.

Similarly, attorney Joseph Welch challenged Senator Joseph McCarthy on national television in 1954 when McCarthy casually dropped names of supposed Communist sympathizers with limited evidence.

"Have you no sense of decency, sir?" Welch famously asked.

The bottom line is that critical thinking and judicious communication are at the heart of good citizenship. Let's commit to carefully consuming and conveying information – and to teach our children to do the same.