

## When You See Something Say Something: FBI Asks for Help from Teachers

One of the most difficult things I have ever had to do in my career in education has been to report students who I suspected were either victims of child abuse or may have been considering suicide. If you have ever had to do this, you know how difficult it is. I only did this after a lot of consideration and prayer. It is a difficult, but clearly the right thing to do. Teachers are often uniquely situated to see more student struggles than they reveal to others in their lives. The actions of teachers in bringing to appropriate authorities' insights about their students has no doubt saved many student lives. Because of the unique position that teachers have, the FBI is now asking that they add paying attention to students who are moving toward violent ideologies to their list of responsibilities.

The FBI has released a [guide for school employees](#) letting teachers know what the signs are for radicalization of students into violent ideologies. The booklet notes that high school students, because of factors emerging in the personality development and their need to be accepted by society, are often very susceptible to being recruited into such ideologies and that these ideologies frequently use the internet for recruitment. The guide is a quick read and would serve as a helpful resource for school staff who have concerns about a particular student.

They have also released a [website for students](#) that is very basic and very foreboding. The theme of the website is, "Don't be a Puppet," and the front page shows a puppet on strings with six choices to click on:

1. What is violent extremism?
2. Why do people become violent extremists?
3. What are the known violent extremist groups?
4. How do violent extremists make contact?
5. Who do violent extremists affect?
6. Where to go for help.

If a student clicks on one of the choices, they move into various rooms that provide them with information. A number of the rooms are dark, secretive, basement rooms, evoking thoughts of the type of place one might think violent extremists would work out of. At first I thought this dark, foreboding motif was odd. But then I realized that this is the appropriate theme, because students who are visiting these websites are truly flirting with darkness and sin. It is creepy, and it is scary. They need help.

As Christians we need to be beacons of light to these students. In our role as classroom teachers we are not free to witness to students, but we can pray and we can be a good influence. And in other contexts, or when asked about our faith, we can point them toward the light of Christ. Just being there

with the students will make a difference. “For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Corinthians 4:6)

The website and booklet promote early interventions and reaching out proactively with better choices for students getting involved in such activities. The real strength of the program is to help prevent students from making very bad, evil choices for themselves that would destroy their own lives even if they never engaged in a violent act. However, for the most extreme situations the website advises students:

*Please contact someone you trust if someone you know is:*

- *Spending a lot of time reading violent extremist information online, including in chat rooms and password-protected websites;*
- *Using several different cell phones and private messaging apps;*
- *Talking about traveling to places that sound suspicious;*
- *Researching or training with weapons or explosives;*
- *Studying or taking pictures of potential targets (like a government building);*
- *Using code words or unusual language;*
- *Looking for ways to disrupt computers or other technology;*
- *Staying away from friends or family while becoming very interested in violent extremist beliefs and propaganda; and/or*
- *Posting comments encouraging violence on social media sites or online forums.*

*Remember that extremist thoughts are not against the law. However, the warning signs above could mean that someone plans to commit violence. If you come across something suspicious, don't hesitate to report it.”*

In response to the “Don't be a Puppet” program a score of advocacy groups in August sent a [letter to FBI director Comey](#) complaining that the program encourages “racial profiling” of students, “ideological policing,” and “will have a chilling effect on our schools and on immigrant communities jeopardizing children's sense of safety.” I have to say that after reviewing the website and the booklet I did not see them promoting racial profiling or stigmatizing immigrant communities. Rather, the materials are careful to list multiple dangerous extremist ideologies potentially targeting children as recruits including white supremacist groups, extreme environmentalists and groups targeting Muslims.

In response to this letter the *US Department of Education* announced that they have recently created a web page on the [prevention of religious discrimination in the schools](#) . It took me a while to find it, but I was heartened to see that on the website included the [Letter of Guidance issued in 1998](#) by then Education Secretary Richard Riley to explain the rights that Christians and other students have to share

their faith and pray on campus. This letter is one of the cornerstones that CEAI staff and attorneys use to train and defend teachers who do try to bring the light of Christ into the school in legally permissible ways. It is vitally important that Christian students, as well as all other students, be permitted to share their faith fully with other students on the campus. And it is incredibly important that you will be there when students return over the upcoming weeks to serve as a positive influence, pray for, and help students with the many issues they are struggling with, and to protect and promote their religious liberties in the classroom.

You can address your comments on this column to [JMitchell@ceai.org](mailto:JMitchell@ceai.org). John Mitchell is the Washington, DC Area Director for the Christian Educators Association.

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