

May 3, 2024

Shawn Johnson, Ed.D.
Superintendent
Clarendon County School District

Via e-mail: [REDACTED]

Dear Dr. Johnson:

I'm writing from [TeachKind](#), PETA's humane education division, which works with thousands of educators throughout the U.S. to help bring compassion into their curricula. We saw a [report](#) out of Clarendon County involving two juveniles who were allegedly seen in a social media video torching, chasing, and then kicking an opossum to death. The video, which news outlets declined to show due to its graphic content, appears to depict a teen spraying an opossum with an accelerant and lighting them on fire, punting the flaming animal several yards, and then stomping on the still-burning body. A [photo of the opossum's corpse](#), seemingly shared in a disturbingly celebratory spirit, was also allegedly circulated on social media. Both individuals have reportedly been charged with felony III treatment of animals.

Whether or not these young people are currently enrolled in your school district, there's no doubt that [your community is grappling with the news](#), and your students have likely heard the reports as well. We applaud your district's [dedication to character education](#) and are committed to providing free resources to support your students in processing difficult information such as this and to assisting leaders like you in preventing future acts of cruelty.

[An epidemic of youth violence is surging](#) throughout the U.S., and your district is far from alone. As [former educators](#), we know what a heavy responsibility teachers bear to help ensure *everyone's* safety to the best of their abilities. We have dialogues with staff from schools nationwide on a regular basis about similar situations and can share how others have responded to comparable incidents by using them as opportunities for growth. To that end, we're offering our free resources—including [Empathy Now](#), our research-based guide that outlines steps to address and prevent youth violence against animals. This tool was developed with trauma-informed principles at its core as a direct response to the frequent similar instances that have occurred nationwide.

As mental-health and law-enforcement experts know well, [cruelty to animals](#) and violence against humans are inextricably linked. Tracking this concerning connection, the FBI's extensive criminal database categorizes acts of cruelty against animals on par with serious felony offenses, such as arson, burglary, assault, and homicide. Many educators are aware that serial killers and school shooters tend to have a history of cruelty to animals, and [Sandy Hook Promise](#) includes cruelty to animals on its "[10 Critical Warning Signs of Violence](#)" list. Research indicates that it's common for young people to have witnessed the abuse of animals, which can be a [form of trauma](#), and children who have observed acts of cruelty to animals



are more likely to abuse animals themselves. Considering that schools across the country continue to experience violence with staggering frequency, it's imperative that you and your staff be familiar with this critical warning sign and take it seriously—many lives could depend on it.

A recent [study](#) on the connection between violence against animals and violence against humans concluded, "Teaching children to be more humane, compassionate, and respectful towards living beings can help reduce all types of violence." It's critical that schools set a standard of compassion by fostering empathy for animals throughout their lessons and activities, and [research suggests that this can even help students academically](#). Existing programming can easily be bolstered by incorporating [humane education](#) into the curricula, which would allow you to reach susceptible kids *before* they engage in violent behavior. Doing so would support your district's compliance with [South Carolina's law](#) requiring schools to develop a policy addressing character education and encouraging schools to incorporate traits including "[r]espect for others," "kindness," and "compassion" into this type of programming.

To support this meaningful work without burdening your budget, **we're also sending you our [Challenging Assumptions](#) curriculum, which is designed to encourage empathy and promote a positive school culture** by supporting students in examining discrimination and other social justice issues. In addition, we're sending a copy of [Animalkind: Remarkable Discoveries About Animals and Revolutionary New Ways to Show Them Compassion](#), and we'd be happy to send additional copies to the high school of your choice. This mesmerizing book poignantly highlights the abundance of ways in which humans and other animals are more alike than different, opening the door to [meaningful classroom discussions](#). Last, we're sending a set of our [anti-bullying posters](#), which can be displayed throughout your schools to remind kids that they have the power to help others by reporting abuse when they see it.

Our team is dedicated to providing educators with free resources to help them [develop students' academic skills](#) and empathy for others simultaneously. We're available to host [virtual presentations](#) for your students by experts on various animal rights topics as well as to work directly with teachers in your district—whatever would serve your team best.

On behalf of PETA and our many members and supporters who live in South Carolina, thank you for considering this important matter. I look forward to connecting with you at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Julie Everett (she/her)
Correspondence and Project Administrator
[TeachKind](#) | PETA's Humane Education Division

cc: Dr. Erica Murdaugh, Director of Early Childhood and Elementary Education ([REDACTED])
Dr. Tyneshia Eaddy, Director of Secondary Education ([REDACTED])
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