

May 6, 2024

Jeff Danielsen, Ed.D.
Superintendent
Watertown School District

Via e-mail: [REDACTED]

Dear Dr. Danielsen:

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 Watertown that two 16-year-olds are each facing charges, including felony cruelty to animals and aiding and abetting cruelty to animals, respectively, after apparently deliberately hitting a pregnant cow with a vehicle. The cow reportedly sustained injuries so severe that she required euthanasia. This violent attack was apparently documented on social media, and the [disturbing footage](#) allegedly includes audio in which one of the individuals jeers, "Hit it, hit it, hit it" before the driver swerves and strikes the animal, with laughter erupting following the collision.

Whether or not these individuals are currently enrolled in your school district, there's no doubt that your community is discussing the news, and your students have likely heard the reports as well. TeachKind is dedicated to providing free resources to support young people in processing such information and to assist leaders like you in preventing future acts of cruelty. We applaud your district's [dedication to social-emotional learning](#), and we'd be pleased to help enhance your existing programming.

[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.

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 a class set for students at Watertown High School. 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.

In addition to providing free materials, TeachKind is available to host [virtual presentations](#) for your students by experts on various animal rights topics as well as to work directly with teachers—whatever would serve your team best.

On behalf of PETA and our many members and supporters who live in South Dakota, 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: Derek Barrios, Assistant Superintendent ([REDACTED])
Tricia Walker, K12 Instructional Design Coordinator ([REDACTED])

