

May 21, 2024

Andrea Castañeda  
Superintendent  
Salem-Keizer Public Schools

Via e-mail: [REDACTED]

Dear Ms. Castañeda:

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 Salem that police were investigating a group of young people suspected of animal abuse related to the gruesome shooting of Vortex, a local family's cat, whose death was reportedly captured on home surveillance video. The [footage](#), which news outlets reportedly declined to show in full due to its graphic content, appears to depict a group of teens gathered around the cat before another juvenile approaches and shoots the feline at close range with a long-barreled gun. As the cat convulsed on the ground following the vicious attack, the five teens were reportedly seen recording videos of the scene in a disturbingly amused spirit. The alleged original shooter then appears to fire a second, point-blank shot at the cat, after which the group reportedly carried his lifeless body to a neighboring yard.

Whether or not these individuals 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. 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 development](#) and commitment to implementing inclusive, trauma-informed practices, and we're on standby 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. Doing so would also support your district in addressing [Oregon's statute](#) which asserts that "[I]n public schools special emphasis shall be given to instruction in..." the "[h]umane treatment of animals."

**To support this meaningful work without burdening your budget, we're sending you a selection of our free resources.** These include our [Share the World](#) program, which is the perfect resource for teaching young students the Golden Rule and the importance of kindness and compassion, and our [Challenging Assumptions](#) curriculum, which is designed to encourage empathy and promote a positive school culture by supporting secondary 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 district high school of your choice. This captivating 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 Oregon, 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: Olga Cobb, Deputy Superintendent, Elementary ( [REDACTED] )  
Iton Udosenata, Deputy Superintendent, Secondary ( [REDACTED] )  
Suzanne West, Director, Strategic Initiatives ( [REDACTED] )

