Mt. Nebo Middle School was the subject of viral "furry" outrage last month and subsequent hoax bomb threats. BETHANY BAKER | The Salt Lake Tribune

Utah schools say 'furries' — kids dressing and acting like animals — is not common

Actual instances are rare, but claims that go viral surrounding "furries" have created disruptions and safety issues for students and staff, officials say.

By CARMEN NESBITT

Sometimes, Utah kids wear animal-ear headbands to school. Sometimes, they bark or growl during recess.

But generally, disruptive incidents involving students wearing animal accessories or portraying animal-like behavior are rare, officials with several Utah school districts told The Salt Lake Tribune.

"I can only think of a handful of instances where this has even come up as a question over the last few years," said Benjamin Horsley, spokesperson for the Granite School District. "I'm not aware of any issues where somebody attempted to hiss or bite [or] make animal noises beyond playing on the playground, as children often play pretend."

That reality differs from recent claims in right-wing social media circles that "furries" — part of a subculture of people who sometimes dress up like animal characters but act like humans — are causing problems in Utah schools. The claims began after a video depicting Mt. Nebo Middle School students staging a walkout in protest of "furries" quickly spread online last month.

The viral posts from accounts including Libs of TikTok, which shares anti-LGBTQ posts and other clips on X geared at generating right-wing outrage, claimed students were protesting because the school allowed student "furries" to "terrorize," "bite," "bark," and "pounce" other classmates. Some accounts also shared photos and videos of children they claimed were proof of "furries" at the school, showing a child wearing animal accessories in a hallway and a kid seeming to bark outdoors. They did not specify the source of the images or detail when and where they were taken.

Nebo School District spokesperson Seth Sorenson repeatedly asserted the claims were false, instead saying the "furry" rumors stemmed from an incident where two students wearing headbands with animal ears while eating lunch at the middle school were targeted by other students "because they were dressed differently."

Sorenson noted the two students who had been wearing animal-ear headbands were asked to remove them. "They complied and have not worn them since," he said.

The school has since been plagued by hoax bomb threats, which police suspect are tied to the viral "furry outrage."

The situation at Mt. Nebo Middle School was one of several instances in recent years in which schools across the nation suddenly found themselves embroiled in apparent right-wing, anti-LGBTQ rhetoric about "furries."

In such situations, the claims typically — and inaccurately — allege that teachers permit "furries" to use litter boxes, that children identify as animals, or that wearing animal costumes or accessories constitutes sexually deviant behavior.

When asked whether "furries" were a prevalent issue in Utah schools, several district spokespeople responded with a straightforward, "No."

"The rumors surrounding these issues are much more prevalent than actual issues," Horsley said.

HOW OFTEN DO UTAH KIDS WEAR ANIMAL ACCESSORIES TO SCHOOL?

Utah school districts generally don't track dress code violations, the disciplinary category that wearing animal accessories to school would fall under.

"But anecdotally, we have seen in the last few years an uptick in kids wearing animal-related accessories," Horsley said. "But it's still a very, very, very small small portion of our overall student population."

Should a student's accessories lead to learning-environment disruptions, they are typically asked to take them off, officials said. If distracting accessories are worn to school repeatedly, students could face escalating discipline including parent notification, detention or in-school suspension.

Alpine School District, for instance, does not prohibit "specific types of footwear, headbands or tails," district spokesperson Rich Stowell said, but it does forbid dress that results in a "disruption of the educational process in the school."

"It is not common nor disruptive," Stowell said of students wearing animal accessories. "Our students are generally respectful of their learning environments. If any clothing disrupts learning, staff address it appropriately."

Davis School District spokesperson Christopher Williams simply responded "no" when asked if Davis students wear animal accessories to school.

At Granite, the dress code prohibits "costumes in general and anything that would prove to be a distraction," said Horsley.

"Generally, anything above and beyond a headband is probably causing obstruction or a distraction and that would be in violation of our dress code," he said.

Horsley added that "tails" and "paws" are considered costumes and are therefore prohibited. He recalled one instance where a student wore a tail attachment to class, but they were promptly asked to remove it.

ARE STUDENTS ACTING LIKE ANIMALS IN CLASS?

While students may occasionally pretend to be animals during recess, district officials have emphasized that making animal noises, running around on all fours, or engaging in other disruptive behaviors are otherwise not permitted. This applies to any behavior that could cause disruption at school.

"Students are required to act and behave in appropriate ways during instructional time, Horsley said.

Scratching or biting other students — whether a child is or isn't wearing animal accessories — is considered a "disruptive act" and therefore prohibited across schools in Utah. So is bullying.

For instance, Canyons School District strictly prohibits students and staff from "engaging individually or collectively in any form of bullying, hazing, cyber-bullying, abusive conduct, or retaliation on school property."

"We thoroughly investigate any and all reports of bullying, hazing, or abusive conduct in our schools," said Canyons spokesperson Kirsten Stewart. "This policy applies equally to everyone, whether the students involved are wearing Hello Kitty headbands, commemorative T-shirts for a rock band, or the insignia of favorite sports teams."

ARE THERE LITTER BOXES IN UTAH SCHOOLS?

No, several district officials told The Tribune. There is no knowledge or evidence that any Utah schools have litter boxes available for student use.

"If there were, social media would be overrun with visual evidence of their existence," said Williams, a Davis School District spokesperson.

The Utah State Board of Education has also never received a formal complaint about students using litter boxes, a spokesperson said.

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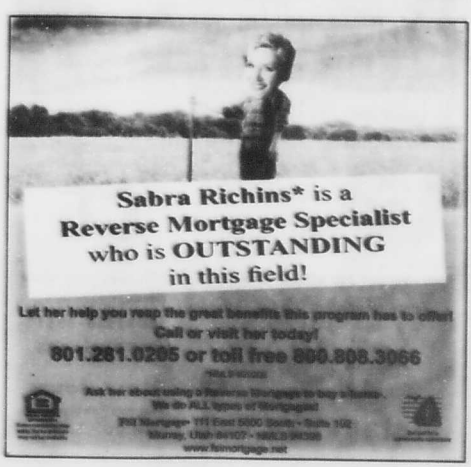

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