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Addressing Unacceptable Behavior At Half Moon Bay High School Sporting Events

Issue

Has Half Moon Bay High School adequately addressed the on-going issue of unacceptable behavior at home sporting events?

Background

In November 2007, several local newspapers, including the *Daily Journal*, the *Daily News* and the *Oakland Tribune*, reported on the unacceptable behavior of Half Moon Bay High School's (HMBHS) students, fans and football players toward the spectators, students, and athletes of Sequoia High School (Sequoia) during a football game on November 2, 2007. Sequoia was the visiting team. This behavior included racial and homophobic slurs toward Sequoia football players, and harassment of Sequoia cheerleaders and fans.

The Daily Journal reported on November 8, 2007, "...a dramatic and unfortunate turn of events at Friday night's Sequoia-Half Moon Bay football game led to serious complaints by Sequoia officials. They say racial and homophobic slurs, as well as rocks, eggs and pine cones were hurled at Sequoia players, cheerleaders and fans. Sequoia officials said the cheerleaders and fans needed a police escort out of the stadium while rocks were thrown at the buses transporting the Sequoia football team back to Redwood City."

It was also reported in *The Daily Journal*, on November 14, 2007, that "...accusations of Half Moon Bay Cougars players using racial and homophobic slurs at Sequoia High School players; four naked youth storming the field, and eggs thrown at [Sequoia] Cherokee cheerleaders and fans during the Nov. 2 football game sparked outrage on both sides of the field."

On November 9, 2007, Cabrillo Unified School District officials, the HMBHS principal, and student leaders issued formal letters of apology to Sequoia. In a note to the Sequoia principal, the HMBHS principal stated that an educational program for students and parents would be implemented to help thwart similar behavior in the future.

Investigation

The San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) interviewed key administrators of HMBHS and Sequoia, a senior official of the Peninsula Athletic League, staff of the longstanding diversity committee at HMBHS, a board member and senior administrator of the Cabrillo Unified School District (CUSD). The Grand Jury interviewed a member of the Sequoia Union High School District Board and a senior administrator of the Sequoia Union High School District.

The Grand Jury reviewed CUSD policies relating to student behavior at school sports functions on campus. The Grand Jury also reviewed the Central Coast Section (CCS) Sportsmanship Policy and the proposed changes to the Sportsmanship Contract as recommended by the Sportsmanship Committee, League Commissioners and the League's Executive Committee.

The Grand Jury reviewed the updated May 2008, HMBHS Cougar Code of Conduct that must be signed by Cougar athletes and their parent/guardian to verify that they have read and understood the HMBHS Player's "Code of Conduct."

Findings

The Grand Jury found through its investigation that:

- Unacceptable behavior has been a problem at HMBHS sports events for many years.
- HMBHS Principal and student body officers issued written apologies to Sequoia.
- No concrete evidence of policy or procedures was discovered regarding specific disciplinary actions to be taken against guilty parties or school sports teams.
- CUSD interviewees stated the belief that its unique small coastal town isolation could be a contributing factor to the HMBHS attitudes and behavior.
- HMBHS has engaged the Positive Coaching Alliance to facilitate the promotion of good sportsmanship by the HMBHS administration. By Fall 2008, the Positive Coaching Alliance will have met with coaches, staff, student athletes, and their parents.
- HMBHS's Diversity Policy will be printed on the school-year calendar, which will be distributed to all students and reviewed in class.

The Grand Jury also found that HMBHS plans to:

- Provide sensitivity training to all students.
- Have more visible staff on site to deter and handle any mischief at HMB High School sporting events.

- Accept the proposed changes to the Sportsmanship Contract. The Sportsmanship Contract is “the minimum requirement, and the schools can always provide more information to remind students, athletes, coaches, and parents of the importance of sportsmanship¹.”
- Make physical changes to the football field to limit contact between visiting teams and their fans and HMBHS fans. The proposed changes include:
 1. Relocating the snack bar to a neutral area that will limit HMB High School teams and fans from coming in contact with visiting teams and their fans.
 2. Putting up a fence in back of the bleachers of the visiting team area.

Conclusion

The Grand Jury concludes that:

1. Although steps have been taken to encourage cordiality with spectator sports fans from both HMBHS and visiting teams, implementation of some of these proposed changes have not yet occurred.
2. There is little evidence of a response plan and/or a disciplinary policy by HMBHS if unacceptable behavior arises at future sporting events.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that the Cabrillo Unified School District Board of Trustees direct the Superintendent to:

1. Formulate, for the Board’s adoption, a disciplinary policy that includes zero-tolerance of unacceptable behavior for student athletes and the student body. This could include forfeiting all games for that year in the sport in which the unacceptable behavior occurred.
2. Implement the adopted disciplinary policy.
3. Formulate and implement a response plan to deal with unacceptable behavior at sporting events.
4. Direct the Half Moon Bay High School Principal to:
 - a. Take appropriate steps to implement the physical plans listed above in the Grand Jury's findings in this report.
 - b. Provide all students with the policies listed in Recommendations 1 and 2 above.
 - c. Have all students sign a form that verifies that they have read the disciplinary policy.

¹ Sportsmanship Contract CIF/Central Coast Section April 24, 2008



SPORTSMANSHIP CONTRACT

CIF/CENTRAL COAST SECTION

6830 Via Del Oro, Suite 103, San Jose CA 95119

408-224-2994 408-224-0476 (FAX)

www.cifccs.org

April 24, 2008

The attached proposed changes to the Sportsmanship Contract have been recommended from the Sportsmanship Committee, League Commissioners and the Executive Committee.

The concept of having the principal and athletic director sign off on the Sportsmanship Contracts verifying they will adhere to the current CCS and School's Sportsmanship Policies will still be in place.

The concern of having schools turn in the Sportsmanship Contract every season seemed to create quite a paper crunch for all people concerned. The following changes seem to accomplish the same purpose and eliminate 2 deadlines.

The recommended changes/additions are:

1. The Principal or designate will present to the entire student body, the school's and the CCS's Sportsmanship Policy based on the Principles of Pursuing Victory with Honor.
2. The Principal or designate will present to the entire faculty, the school's and the CCS's Sportsmanship Policy based on the Principles of Pursuing Victory with Honor.
3. The Principal or designate will present to their parents verbally and in writing, the school's and the CCS's Sportsmanship Policy based on the Principles of Pursuing Victory with Honor.
4. The Principal will need to complete the Sportsmanship Contract with examples/outlines of the presentations to the student body, faculty and parents.
5. The Sportsmanship Contract needs to be completed and submitted to the CCS Office prior to the first league contest of the Fall Season.
6. The Sportsmanship Contract needs to be submitted only once for the entire year.

The Sportsmanship Contract is the minimum requirement and the schools can always provide more information to remind students, athletes, coaches and parents of the importance of sportsmanship.

September 30, 2008

Honorable Joseph C. Scott
Judge of the Superior Court
Hall of Justice
400 County Center, 2nd floor
Redwood City, CA 94063-1655

Re: Addressing Unacceptable Behavior at Half Moon Bay High School Sporting Events Report.

Following are responses from Cabrillo Unified School District regarding the findings, conclusions, and recommendations contained in this report:

Findings

The Grand Jury found through its investigation that:

- Unacceptable behavior has been a problem at HMBHS sports events for many years.

District response: We concur that unacceptable behavior occurred during a football game between Half Moon Bay High School and Sequoia High School last fall hosted by HMBHS. Although some of the allegations stemming from that game were never substantiated, the Cabrillo Unified School District and the Half Moon Bay High School communities are fully committed to creating and sustaining an atmosphere that is safe, warm, and welcoming for athletes, officials, and spectators. As you will note in our responses that follow, we seek to use this incident to generate improvements in our game management that will characterize Half Moon Bay High School as a model program where every action reflects the core principles of the California Interscholastic Federation's publication "Pursuing Victory with Honor."

We disagree with the more general finding that "unacceptable behavior has been a problem at HMBHS sports events for many years." It has? With all due respect, this assertion paints a broad brush stroke across all of our athletic programs, all participating athletes, all coaches, and all spectators. This is a very damaging

claim. Does the Grand Jury have specific evidence to support this sweeping statement? If so, such documentation should be shared with the District.

- HMBHS Principal and student body officers issued written apologies to Sequoia.

District response: We concur with this finding.

- No concrete evidence of policy or procedures was discovered regarding specific disciplinary actions to be taken against guilty parties or school sports teams.

District response: We disagree with this finding. Countless hours were spent interviewing game officials, coaches, school officials, and players... reviewing tapes of the game... and cross-checking our findings with Sequoia High School personnel. The District was unable to either substantiate a number of the allegations or identify individuals who allegedly engaged in inappropriate behavior. We disagree with the notion of taking action against a “sports team” unless it can be established that virtually every member of that team was guilty of engaging in inappropriate or unsafe behavior. We do not believe in “punishing many” for the actions of a few.

- CUSD interviewees stated the belief that its unique small town isolation could be a contributing factor to the HMBHS attitudes and behavior.

District response: Who were those interviewees? Individuals can harbor and express very unique perspectives. The District is not in a position to either agree or disagree with such a finding. We believe that the small town flavor and rich history of our coastal communities are very positive factors and one of the reasons why so many people seek to live here on the Coast.

- HMBHS has engaged the Positive Coaching Alliance to facilitate the promotion of good sportsmanship by the HMBHS administration. By fall, 2008, the Positive Coaching Alliance will have met with coaches, staff, student athletes, and their parents.

District response: We concur with this finding.

The Grand Jury also found that HMBHS plans to:

- Provide sensitivity training to all students.

District response: We concur with this finding.

- Have more visible staff on site to deter and handle and mischief at HMB High School sporting events.

District response: We concur with this finding. Specific implementation strategies are addressed in the *Schoolwide Changes for Sporting Events* plan that was developed by Half Moon Bay High School staff and presented to the Board for review and approval on June 5, 2008.

- Accept the proposed changes to the Sportsmanship Contract. The Sportsmanship Contract is “the minimum requirement, and the schools can always provide more information to remind students, athletes, and parents of the importance of sportsmanship.”

District response: We concur with this finding.

- Make physical changes to the football field to limit contact between visiting teams and their fans and HMBHS fans. The proposed changes include:
 - 1) Relocating the snack bar to a neutral area that will limit HMB teams and fans from coming in contact with visiting teams and their fans.
 - 2) Putting up a fence in the back of the bleachers of the visiting team area.

District response: We concur with this finding although we do not agree with the premise that the physical changes are needed to “limit HMB teams and fans from coming into contact with visiting teams and their fans.” This is another sweeping and very damaging assertion that seems to suggest that visitors need to be “protected” from our teams and fans. We are a welcoming community that routinely hosts thousands of visitors and tourists on an annual basis. In a vast majority of instances, visitors to our athletic events and other extracurricular programs discover very warm and welcoming environments. The physical changes that are being implemented at significant cost, including a new staircase providing far greater access to field level and the visitor’s bleachers, are designed to create better pedestrian traffic flows and greater access to facilities (restrooms, snack bars, etc.) There is already a fence in the back of the bleachers of the visiting team area. We are expanding the bleachers and revamping our security measures on that side of the field as part of a comprehensive plan to create an even safer and more welcoming environment for interscholastic competition.

Conclusions

The Grand Jury concludes that:

1. Although steps have been taken to encourage cordiality with spectator sports fans from both HMBHS and visiting teams, implementation of some of these proposed changes have not yet occurred.

District response: We are not sure when this assertion was made but the District has taken a significant number of steps in the aftermath of the original event to “encourage cordiality” and to address virtually every recommendation that was generated by the Grand Jury, as detailed below. Given the relatively brief time to respond to this report and the costs associated with several of the recommendations, we believe that the thoroughness of our response to the alleged events of last October is particularly noteworthy.

2. There is little evidence of a response plan and or a disciplinary policy by HMBHS if unacceptable behavior arises at future sporting events.

District response: We disagree with this conclusion. Note comments above and District responses to recommendations that follow.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that the Cabrillo Unified School District Board of Trustees direct the Superintendent to:

1. Formulate, for the Board’s adoption, a disciplinary policy that includes a zero-tolerance of unacceptable behavior for student athletes and the student body. This could include forfeiting of all games for that year in the sport to which the unacceptable behavior occurred.

District response: Completed. Work on revised *Board Policy 6145.2 Instruction: Athletic Competition* was completed in time for Board review and approval on August 18, 2008. BP 6145.2 includes the following language:

“The Board supports the ideals of sportsmanship, ethical conduct and fair play and commits the district to providing an environment which promotes good sportsmanship.

The Board expects athletes, coaches, spectators and others to demonstrate good sportsmanship during all athletic competition and maintains a zero tolerance policy in response to improper behavior at athletic events.

Each school shall adopt and implement appropriate federation or league guidelines and rules related to sportsmanship, citizenship, and behavior at athletic contests and communicate clearly these guidelines and rules to members of the school community.

In preparing for and participating in athletic competitions, students

and staff shall abide by the core principles of trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship, as adopted by the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) in its publication “Pursuing Victory with Honor.”

Students and staff members will be subject to disciplinary action for improper conduct related to this policy up to and including expulsion for students and dismissal for staff members depending on the severity of the act. If so warranted, specific charges shall also be filed with the appropriate law enforcement agency.”

This revised policy reflects exceptionally high standards and expectations—likely, we suspect, among the most stringent of such policies in the region.

2. Implement the adopted disciplinary policy.

District response: Completed. As indicated above, the policy has been reviewed and approved by the CUSD Board and included in the *Half Moon Bay High School Athletic Department Handbook* that is reviewed and “signed off” by student-athletes and their parents. The policy is supported by a comprehensive *Schoolwide Changes for Sporting Events* plan that was presented to the Board on June 5, 2008. The District and HMBHS stand ready to respond to individuals who violate the tenets of this policy in a firm and timely manner.

3. Formulate and implement a response plan to deal with unacceptable behavior at sporting events.

District response: As indicated in the response above, Half Moon Bay High School staff completed work on a comprehensive *Schoolwide Changes for Sporting Events* plan in late spring. The plan includes a number of components including public address announcements that will be made during the course of an athletic contest... increased supervision at games...and several enhancements to the football stadium noted earlier in this document. In addition, newly hired New Half Moon Bay High School Principal Mary Streshly (a former Sequoia High School administrator) has worked with her staff to develop specific sanctions that will be applied to students who engage in unacceptable behavior while participating in, or attending, all extracurricular activities.

4. Direct the Half Moon Bay High School Principal to:
 - a. Take appropriate steps to implement the physical plans listed above in the Grand Jury’s findings in this report.
 - b. Provide the students with the policies listed in Recommendations 1 and 2 above.

- c. Have all students sign a form that verifies that they have read the disciplinary policy.

District response: Completed. With one exception (permanent expansion of visitor-side bleachers), every proposed change to the physical plant has been completed at the football stadium in time for the season's first home game. We anticipate installing a significantly larger and safer (thanks to a recently completed concrete pad) set of bleachers on the visitor's side of the field in approximately twelve weeks. The HMBHS Activity Director reviewed the importance of good sportsmanship with the entire student body during a recent back-to-school rally and HMBHS students have received and signed-off on the newly-revised policies and description of potential sanctions associated with unacceptable behavior at Half Moon Bay High School sporting events.

Respondent for the Cabrillo Unified School District:

Robert B. Gaskill
District Superintendent