

RE: Statement from David Aderhold, Superintendent of the West Windsor – Plainsboro Regional School District Regarding Fall Interscholastic Athletics

As the news continues to report stories of athletes who have tested positive for COVID-19 or teams that have quarantined due to outbreaks, there is no return to normalcy. Professional and collegiate athletic programs must endure changing conditions such as daily COVID-19 testing, altered living arrangements, and constantly shifting schedules due to the cancellation of games. These teams have access to resources that far exceed our local school districts and yet we pretend that school districts can pull off our seasons simply because we desire the return to normalcy.

As a society, we yearn for the return of athletics. It's understandable that there is a false sense of security that high school sports can return in the fall. The Governor permitted recreation and independent leagues to engage in summer participation, with restrictions. High school sports programs were allowed to follow specific phased reopenings under the direction of the New Jersey Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA). Sports leagues have hosted last chance tournaments and returned athletes to local recreation programs. As these leagues returned, we were all lured into a false sense of security that certain activities do not pose a significant COVID-19 risk. Yet, as New Jersey returned to traditional summertime activities, there has been a substantial rise in the transmission rate, from 0.8 on June 26 (date the "Restart and Recovery Plan for Education" plan was issued) to 1.32 on August 6. That increased transmission rate does pose a significant risk.

Nationally, there have been serious concerns as high school sports geared up for the return to playing fields. There have been tournament cancellations, postponement or suspension of seasons, and the pause of voluntary workouts for both collegiate and high school programs due to suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases. At the cornerstone of WW-P's reopening planning is the safety, health, and wellness of our students and our staff. During the pandemic, we have noted serious concerns about the viability of fall sports, taking into consideration the stringent social distancing guidelines and other health standards contained in New Jersey's "Restart and Recovery Plan for Education."

After careful consideration, the West Windsor – Plainsboro Regional School District has decided to cancel the fall athletic season for varsity, sub-varsity, and middle school, as well as the upcoming marching band season. This cancellation is grounded in three primary areas: 1) health, safety, and wellness of our student athletes, coaches, spectators, and school community, 2) social and emotional welfare of our teams, and 3) the financial implications for our school district.

Health, Safety, and Wellness of our Student Athletes, Coaches, Spectators, and School Community

Our approved reopening plan bans the utilization of in-person after school clubs and activities, closes locker rooms, and eliminates weekend events. We have taken these steps to ensure that strict social distancing guidelines are followed and that we can uphold our cleaning and disinfecting plan. Eliminating facility usage allows us to shift custodian staff from the evening to

the day shift to further protect our students and staff that are participating in an in-person hybrid model.

There is an inherent risk in bringing athletes, fans and coaches from other districts, or the risk that another district may experience as we bring our students, coaches, and fans to their school community. Unfortunately, these risks could completely invalidate all our efforts to keep our school community safe and our schools open.

Furthermore, our schools will be operating on an early dismissal schedule for both in-person hybrid and virtual students in an effort to comply with social distancing regulations and public health best practices. The return to athletics presents logistical challenges with regard to offering our athletic program equitably to all of our student athletes as there will be no late buses or after school transportation.

Lastly, participation in athletics is practically impossible in a way that would not violate the Governor's mask order for students. Inevitably, athletes would participate without their masks, thereby increasing the potential for the transmission of COVID-19.

Social and Emotional Welfare of our Teams

As a school community, we have pledged ourselves to the development of the Whole Child and placed a strategic focus on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). Thus, we are committed to ensuring each student is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. To that end, we have entered into an agreement with the WW-P Education Association to ensure that fall varsity head coaches and marching band directors will provide virtual services including virtual workouts and social and emotional support during the regular term of the fall season.

Financial Implications

Safely reopening schools poses significant and daunting financial challenges. To date, WW-P has spent an additional \$3 million in technology, enhanced safety measures, PPE, instructional materials, etc. in order to meet public health and NJDOE guidelines. This increase in spending has occurred following a substantial loss in state aid at the end of June. Further, we await the potential of additional loss of state aid as Governor Murphy will deliver a special budget address on or before Aug. 25 covering Oct. 1, 2020, through June 30, 2021, time period.

These financial considerations are compounded by the fact that the cost of our fall athletic programs will likely increase significantly in order to conduct sports seasons safely. Factors would include increased transportation routes (11 students per bus), social distanced practices, enforcement of restrictions in those attending games, and after-hours adherence to the highest standards of cleaning protocols.

While the cancellation of the fall seasons may be seen as premature, many other organizations have already taken similar steps and there is ample evidence to justify the decision. See the below list of cancellations, postponements, and COVID-19 outbreaks.

Collegiate Cancellations:

Big West

The Big West has postponed fall sports.

Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference

The MAAC has cancelled all fall sports.

Southwestern Athletic Conference

The SWAC has announced that the league will move football to the spring.

Atlantic-10

The A-10 has postponed all fall sports.

Colonial Athletic Association

The Colonial Athletic Association has cancelled their football season.

Big East

The Big East has cancelled all non conference schedules for fall 2020.

American Athletic Conference (AAC)

The AAC is requiring all athletes to be tested 72 hours before football games.

MEAC (Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference)

The MEAC has announced they will not play football in 2020.

Patriot League

The Patriot League has cancelled fall sports. Teams impacted include Bucknell, Colgate, Fordham, Georgetown, Holy Cross, Lafayette and Lehigh.

NJCAA (National Junior College Athletic Association)

The National Junior College Athletic Association has announced the move of football to spring 2021.

Ivy League

The Ivy League has cancelled its fall season. Teams impacted include Brown, Cornell, Columbia, Dartmouth, Harvard, Penn, Princeton, and Yale.

Collegiate Concerns in the News:

- Duke University has announced nine additional COVID-19 cases, bringing the number to 25 athletes that have tested positive (as of Aug. 3).
- The University of Michigan has paused voluntary summer workouts due to a combination of COVID-19 positive test results and challenges implementing contact tracing protocols.
- Michigan State University has announced 16 athletes have tested positive for COVID-19.
- Rutgers University football team is currently in a 14-day quarantine due to a COVID-19 outbreak. Twenty-eight Rutgers football players have tested positive.
- Penn State University has announced that eight athletes have tested positive for the coronavirus.
- University of Connecticut has cancellation their fall 2020 football season.
- Eight UCLA football players have test positive for the coronavirus.
- Princeton University, Drew University, TCNJ, and Rider University are offering a full virtual model in fall 2020.
- Rutgers University is currently offering a majority remote instruction with limited in-person instruction.

High School Concerns in the News:

- The Holmdel High School basketball team and its coaches were required to quarantine after a member of the team tested positive for COVID-19.
- Ramsey High School halted football workouts due to concerns that football players were exposed to an individual with a potentially-positive case of COVID-19.
- Ridgewood High School cancelled parts of their Phase I and II summer workouts due to health concerns.
- A Wayne Valley girls' volleyball player tested positive for COVID-19 requiring a group of athletes to quarantine for 14 days.
- Red Bank Regional Schools cancelled graduation due to COVID-19 concern.
- Maryland Public Schools has postponed the fall and winter season.
- Delaware Interscholastic Athletic Association voted Thursday, August 6 to condense its three seasons into a schedule to start in 2021.
- Pennsylvania's Governor has recommended no high school sports until January 1.

Professional Sports:

- Eighteen Miami Marlins players have tested positive.

- At least four St. Louis Cardinals players have tested positive.

Around NJ:

- Nearly 30 New Jersey lifeguards are quarantined after testing positive for COVID-19.
- Nearly 60 Middletown South teens have tested positive after attending a party.
- 700 people attend a Jackson house party breaking state gathering limits.

I do not envy the position of the NJSIAA. While I appreciate the difficult position in which the NJSIAA finds itself, I implore them to act in the best interest of all student athletes, coaches, spectators, referees, and officials.

The West Windsor – Plainsboro Regional School District remains committed to offering a full continuum of extracurricular experiences to our students. At this time, a return to competition places our student athletes, coaches, musicians, band directors, parents, spectators, officials, and referees at risk. This decision is painful, but it is the necessary decision to protect our school community and athletes. While I have championed the importance of athletics and fought for changes to the rules of the NJSIAA to ensure increased participation of our students, at this time safety is our top priority. Subsequent seasons will be reviewed in due course based upon the impending public health crisis.

Sincerely,

Dr. David Aderhold
Superintendent of Schools