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Assemblyman Reed Gusciora
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Assembly – 15th District
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June 12, 2017

Kimberley Harrington
Acting Commissioner
New Jersey Department of Education
P.O. Box 500
Trenton, NJ 08625-0500

Dear Ms. Harrington,

The West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District (WWP) has recently filed a motion for emergent relief seeking to overturn the NJSIAA's decision to prohibit WWP from combining football programs at High School North (HSN) and High School South (HSS). We write this letter to add our support to WWP's request to ensure that student athletes in the district have the opportunity to participate in the football program this coming school year.

As you know, WWP requested to enter a Cooperative Agreement, but such request was denied by the West Jersey Football Conference (WJFC) and the NJSIAA. WWP's reasons for the request are relevant and reasonable. Participation in the football program is low, which presents a safety concern for the participating student athletes. In the 2016-2017 school year, the schools' football programs had only a total of 15 rising seniors (11 at HSS and 4 at HSN) and a total of 11 rising juniors (6 at HSS and 5 at HSN). Unless the football programs can be combined, the program at HSN is in jeopardy of closing.

Our schools offer interscholastic sports to allow students the opportunity to compete, hone their athletic skills, gain leadership experience, and learn about being part of a team. Sports participation also provides students with an opportunity to engage in regular physical activity, which provides emotional and physical benefits. Some students participate for the love of sports, but others participate to enhance their college applications. Many employers also now look for employees who are former student athletes because the employee comes to the workplace with a different experience and perspective. Therefore, if students at HSN lose the option of playing football (and potentially other sports in the future) they are at a disadvantage compared with students from other districts.

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The closing of the football program would not just impact the football players. Many other school events, activities and experiences are associated with football. Marching band, cheerleading, Friday night events, homecoming, pep rallies, and fundraisers are all a part of the school culture and high school experience. These co-curricular activities enrich students' lives. Studies have found that high school students with school spirit perform better academically and are more socially and civically engaged. Allowing the football program to continue would preserve school spirit and allow the students to experience the camaraderie and community of football and the related events and activities.

An undeniable value exists in sports programs, and our schools should be encouraged to provide opportunities for a diverse learning experience that includes athletics. In fact, this is the goal of both WWP and the NJSIAA. Permitting the programs to combine raises the roster size to ameliorate the safety issues, continues to provide student athletes with the opportunity to participate, and provides numerous advantages to the school community. We urge you to grant WWP's request to allow the football programs to be combined for the coming school year.

Thank you for your kind attention to this request. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,



Shirley K. Turner
Senator – 15th District



Reed Gusciora
Assemblyman – 15th District



Elizabeth Maher Muoio
Assemblywoman – 15th District

cc: Dr. David Aderhold, Superintendent



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June 8, 2017

Honorable Kimberley Harrington
Acting Commissioner
New Jersey Department of Education
100 River View Plaza
P.O. Box 500
Trenton, NJ 08625

Via facsimile: (609) 777-4099

Dear Acting Commissioner Harrington:

I write on a matter of great concern to my constituent families of student athletes in the West Windsor-Plainsboro School District (WW-P): the refusal of the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA) to permit the unification of the football programs of the school district's regional High Schools. This effort comes as a result of decreased participation in WW-P North's high school program leaving the team without a necessary and safe number of players. The same fate also may occur at the South high school's program.

On behalf of the student athletes and families of the WW-P School District, I respectfully request that you overturn the decision of NJSIAA in order to maintain a High School football program at all levels in the District and allow the enactment of the resolution adopted by the WW-P Board of Education on May 23, 2017.

As you are aware, the School District has petitioned NJSIAA to permit them to combine these programs in keeping with the agency's own Constitution and By-Laws that allows for students in Vo-tech and public academies to transfer to a high school should a particular sport not be offered at their home school. NJSIAA has refused such a request and took the additional step of keeping representatives of WW-P from an executive session where the topic was discussed. This act is deeply troubling as the District and its families deserve to know why the agency has ruled against their student athletes.

Unification, or as it has been referred to as a "co-op," appears to be a logical, simple way to maintain the opportunity for a football program to continue in the District. Failure to devise a way to maintain football as a varsity High School sport would deprive these student athletes from the ability to continue their athletic experience at an appropriate level of competition throughout their youth. For many of these athletes, they dream of the ability to play on their High School's varsity football team since the day they first put on a helmet as a young child in recreation sports. To allow NJSIAA to turn their back on these students, some of whom would subsequently lose an opportunity for college scholarships, would be devastating and life-altering.

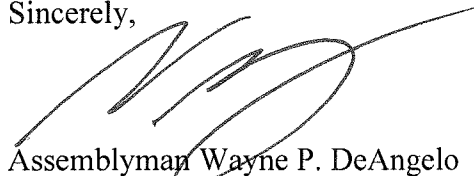
Further, there would be a significant domino effect on other school-related programs and experiences if the football program is suspended. For example, there would be the inability for the marching band and cheerleading squads to perform before the student body community; the lack of social meeting place for students, families and supporters to come together at football games; the termination of these games where residents come together to show community pride; and the loss of memories of high school experiences for all of those who enjoy the sport.

As a youth soccer coach myself, and the father of former student athletes, I know first-hand how important it can be for students to participate in the sports that mean a great deal to them. Team sports are about the life lessons of comradery, discipline, maturity, and all of the high-and-lows of competition. I cannot imagine the devastation of the student athletes affected if a football program is cancelled.

There is a reasonable way for WW-P to protect the football program in their District so that the players can have that experience. Once again, I urge you to support the efforts of the West-Windsor Plainsboro School District to protect the opportunity for its student athletes to participate in a district-wide football program.

I look forward to your favorable decision on this matter. Please feel free to contact me if I may be of further assistance.

Sincerely,



Assemblyman Wayne P. DeAngelo
Deputy Speaker
14th Legislative District

cc: Mr. David Aderhold, Ed.D, Superintendent of Schools, WW-P
Mr. Steve Timko, Executive Director, NJSIAA



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MEMBER, BUDGET AND APPROPRIATIONS

June 12, 2017

The Honorable Kimberley Harrington
Acting Commissioner
NJ Department of Education
100 River View Plaza
P.O. Box 500
Trenton, NJ 08625

Dear Acting Commissioner Harrington,

We are writing to urge you in the strongest terms to rule in favor of the West Windsor-Plainsboro School Board's Petition for Emergent Relief from what we consider to be a narrow, ill-considered ruling by the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA) denying a merger of the football teams from the District's two high schools.

This ruling has a very real potential to cause great harm to students, particularly at West Windsor-Plainsboro North High School.

The appeal now before you also offers significant concessions from the West Windsor-Plainsboro School Board that shows a good faith effort in this matter. Those concessions will be outlined shortly, but first we would like to discuss the rejection by the NJSIAA of the Board's reasonable request.

Members of the Board of Education, coaches, parents, student athletes and Superintendent David Aderhold have all joined in petitioning the NJSIAA to have the football teams merged as the only viable means of maintaining a football program for students attending WW-P High School North. North has too few students coming out for the sport and especially upper classmen to safely field a team. The same conditions are likely to hit WW-P High School South in the next year or two if recruitment remains at its current downward trend.

We believe viewing the sheer numbers involved -- as referenced in the Board's Petition for Emergent Relief before you now -- is enlightening. In a school district of nearly 10,000 students (9,723 at last student census), the football teams at *both* schools combined amounted to only a total of 15 rising seniors -- 11 at HSS, 4 at HSN -- and a *total* of eleven rising juniors (6 at HSS and 5 at HSN).

Clearly the numbers at High School North are not the kind that can sustain a free-standing football team while keeping students safe competing against far larger numbers of upper classmen on other high school teams in their Group.

There are a number of factors that school officials and parents believe are contributing to this condition, including a growing student population whose heritage is not familiar with the sport of football, and increased attention on the potential for sports injuries in contact sports like football that can include concussions.

For example, one mother who identified herself as Chinese, submitted a letter to the Board noting that football may be foreign to "many of our Asian families." The District currently is comprised of 68.4 % of students who identify as Asian.

The NJSIAA's rules against merger are designed to avert attempts to form "powerhouse" programs. But clearly West Windsor-Plainsboro North and South, even by their combined numbers, would not represent an attempt at building a "powerhouse."

To show there are no grand "powerhouse" ambitions here but only an effort to save one and potentially two football programs from disappearing, the Board has even offered to the NJSIAA that it would readily and legally forego any post-season play if the team were to qualify. The Board has also agreed not to accept a sectional trophy on the off-chance the District were to win one.

The Board is only attempting to fairly offer its students, who are interested, a chance to play football. For at least one player from WW-P HSN, the opportunity for a college scholarship hangs in the balance.

This most important matter before you now is truly emergent, as the Board must act by June 27 in order to prepare for the 2017-18 season by hiring coaches and other necessary personnel.

We urge you to do the right thing and allow the WW-P North and South teams to merge in order to save worthy programs and protect the safety of the students.

Thank you for your consideration of this urgent request.

Sincerely,



Linda R. Greenstein
Senator, 14th District



Daniel R. Benson
Assemblyman, 14th District

Cc:

Governor Chris Christie

Members: Board of Education, West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District

Dr. David Aderhold, Superintendent