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Bellevue School District

Response to WIAA Fact Finding Investigative Report of the Bellevue High School Football Program

April 26, 2016

Executive Summary

Bellevue School District (BSD) and Bellevue High School (BHS) received the WIAA investigative report regarding the Bellevue High School football program from the WIAA on April 1, 2016. While the District is disappointed in the manner in which the investigation was conducted, the condemnatory tone of the WIAA report and the numerous inaccurate or misleading statements in the report, the fact-finders did provide findings that necessitate further review and follow-up to determine if the BHS football program violated WIAA rules. Following is a brief summary outlining the Bellevue School District's response to the fact-finding investigation and report. A more detailed response will be forthcoming by the end of the week.

Background

On August 22, 2015, The Seattle Times released an article regarding the BHS football team (Bellevue High's football success aided by 'diploma mill'). Upon review of the article, which included allegations of potential WIAA violations, BHS and BSD administrators began discussions regarding the school and district's responsibility to respond to the article's allegations. Administrators further discussed their concerns with Mr. Mike Colbrese, the Executive Director of Washington Interscholastic Activities Association (WIAA). Mr. Colbrese recommended that the school ask for an investigation to be conducted so that the school could help define the scope of the investigation. Based on Mr. Colbrese's recommendation and the WIAA fact-finding investigation procedures published in the most recent version of the WIAA Handbook (2014/15), Bellevue School District asked the WIAA to conduct a fact-finding investigation of the Bellevue High School football program on the allegations in the article.

The agreed to scope of the investigation was to be:

- Did Bellevue High School football coaches direct athletes to attend Academic Institute?
- Did Bellevue High School boosters pay tuition for athletes at Academic Institute?
- Did athletes falsify addresses to gain eligibility?
- Did athletes receive subsidized housing to gain eligibility?
- Did Bellevue High School football coaches coordinate tuition payments for athletes?

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The School and District understood that if in the process of the investigation, evidence of potential additional WIAA rule violations was uncovered, the investigators would share that information with the District for further inquiry.

The WIAA Investigation

Bellevue High School and Bellevue School District's objective was to have a complete and full investigation into the five specific allegations. During the investigation, district and school administrators anticipated the responsibility to cooperate with investigators by providing them with requested materials and documents as well as access to employees and students for interviews. At the same time, the school and district has important obligations to obey federal privacy laws (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) and to protect the interests of students and their families. Based on the WIAA fact-finding investigation guidelines, the school and the district believed that the fact-finders would conduct the investigation in a fair, ethical and equitable manner.

From the outset, it became clear that the scope of the investigation was being broadened and the investigative approach was not aligned to WIAA guidelines. For example,

- Investigators requested files and records for students with no relationship to the Bellevue High School football program. The district refused to release these records.
- Investigators interviewed over 100 people and never provided the District with an interview list or included it in the WIAA report.
- One of the investigators was removed from the investigation based on complaints.

While the investigation was being conducted, the District received numerous complaints from those interviewed regarding the tone and approach of the fact-finders. Some interviewees were concerned that the investigation was being conducted with a preconceived bias against the BHS football program and that some of the questions were racially biased. Some interviewees also stated that the questions were leading and not directly related to the allegations being investigated.

The WIAA Report

The WIAA report has findings that necessitate further review and follow-up to determine if the BHS football program violated WIAA rules. The allegations under review include:

- Coaches directing players to Academic Institute;
- Boosters paying tuition for athletes at Academic Institute;
- Coaches coordinating payments of tuition for athletes at Academic Institute;
- Athletes using false addresses to gain eligibility;
- Athletes receiving subsidized housing to gain eligibility;
- Athletes using Academic Institute to maintain eligibility;
- Financial payments to coaches without approval from the BSD Board of Directors;
- Excessive financial payments to support football camp;
- Failure to self-report money provided to a player's family by coaches; and,
- Athletes have been illegally recruited.

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The WIAA report also includes inaccurate and misleading statements; adverse inferences wherever the fact-finders could not find direct evidence; a reliance on anonymous and independent sources and unnamed witnesses; and self-serving defense of their practices, tactics and approach to the investigation. In addition, the WIAA report contains unwarranted criticism and unreasonable expectations of district oversight of the Bellevue High School football program. For example, it is not a normal District or WIAA practice to chase anonymous accusations without any evidence being provided.

As stated earlier, the school and district have important obligations to protect students and their families. To fulfill these obligations, the District did refuse to provide unnecessary student records to the investigators. These decisions have resulted in the District being characterized as uncooperative, obstructionist and interfering with the investigation. We stand by these decisions which were made in the best interest of students.

Next Steps

Over the coming weeks, Bellevue High School and Bellevue School District administrators will:

- Release a more detailed response to the investigative process and WIAA report;
- Conduct a more detailed review of pertinent documents to determine if there were WIAA rule violations and report findings to the KingCo Conference; and,
- Develop a plan and begin community outreach.