



## THE EWING PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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TO: Media Executives, Scholastic Athletic Officials, Educational Leaders  
FROM: Ewing Township Board of Education/Administrators  
RE: Media Coverage of Scholastic Sports  
DATE: March 24, 2017

We are writing today to encourage the leaders of schools, scholastic athletic programs and media companies to have a frank discussion about ethics and moral boundaries when it comes to news coverage of high school sports.

It should be acknowledged that it is appreciated when there is positive coverage of scholastic sports. The student-athletes work very hard and it is wonderful when they get press and recognition. As much as things have changed, parents and their children are still excited to read media coverage of their high school athletic achievements.

But the world has evolved significantly, and the internet and new digital landscape has dramatically impacted all aspects of news and media. The era when there would simply be a newspaper article on a game or event that could perhaps end up in a scrapbook or folder has ended. In this modern digital day and age, articles and stories get posted up on the internet, can go viral in a moment, and last forever.

There was an incident this school year which involved one of our student-athletes losing his temper and punched his opponent during competition. Now this is clearly unacceptable, and we are not defending the act. It should also be noted that there are significant consequences for this type of inappropriate behavior. However, professional athletes who are adults have lost their temper in the heat of competition, so it is certainly not beyond the realm of possibility that an adolescent, whose brain and temperament is not fully formed, would momentarily lose control.

Immediately after this incident, a "digital media outlet" perhaps the most popular one in the state, not only showed video footage of this act on their website, identifying the child in the process, but then, in two successive days, solicited comments about the incident and even conducted an online poll on the perceived justification of the act.

This is a child who now has perhaps the worst ten seconds of his life living forever on the internet. The YouTube video upload by the media company has over 715,000 views. This video and news coverage is not going anywhere soon. It will be there when the child is seeking college admission, or looking for a job, a mere Google search away from any inquisitive eyes.

Many of us have backgrounds in youth and scholastic athletics, and can recall a time when there appeared to be a conscious effort on the part of reporters, many of whom had covered the high school beat for years, to always look out for the best interests of kids. They would report on the competition, and the achievements, but would look to protect student-athletes when bad things happened, which, since we are talking about kids, occurred



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frequently. This would mean they would go as far as to not identify an athlete who threw a bad pass, or made a careless turnover or committed a stupid foul.

But that seems to be fading from the modern version of legitimate, mainstream media. We truly understand that anything that happens at a public event in this day and age can be captured on a smart phone by a private individual and end up on YouTube, Twitter or any other social media outlet. But we would like to think that there are different standards, rules and journalistic ethics for media companies.

We believe it must be emphasized that when you attend or cover a scholastic sporting event that you are seeing children who are representing their academic institution taking part in an activity that should be primarily educational. They are not adults, they are not athletes on scholarship, and they are not professionals.

Not only are they children, but quite often they can be children with issues. Some may be identified as learning disabled, or classified as emotionally disturbed, or dealing with stress, anxiety or family issues. But they are children who, with the support of their schools and coaches, are still trying to derive all the educational benefits of participating in scholastic sports.

An interesting twist about this is, as school districts, we must get parental permission before releasing any pictures or information on the children of the district. However, a media outlet can seemingly walk into our gym, and take pictures and publish photos without recourse. It should also be noted that media companies still do not print the names of children who are arrested for serious crimes, yet appear to have no problem showing and publicizing a child making a mistake in scholastic competition.

As educational officials, we believe our most important job is to protect our students. When unfortunate events occur during scholastic sporting events, we would hope that journalists consider the welfare of the student-athlete, as well as the impact and trauma that the resulting negative publicity could have on the child's emotional health and future. A desire for website clicks and "shares" should not be more important than our students. It is our hope that this correspondence will motivate those that have power in these situations to reflect carefully on how they handle these incidents and implement either formal or informal guidelines that are in the best interest of children.

Sincerely,

The Ewing Township Board of Education

Stephanie Staub, President  
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