



JOHN QUATTROCCHI
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VERONA BOARD OF EDUCATION

121 FAIRVIEW AVENUE
VERONA, NEW JERSEY 07044

DR. RUI DIONISIO
SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

CHERYL A. NARDINO,
BUSINESS ADMINISTRATOR/
BOARD SECRETARY

MATTHEW LARACY,
TREASURER OF SCHOOL MONIES

A Statement from the Verona Board of Education
November 4, 2017

The Verona Board of Education and Administration are committed to fostering a healthy and respectful school culture consistent with our core values. The Administration conducted an investigation into recent allegations & concerns pertaining to student safety and well being as reported by several parents in early October 2017. The investigation was completed on November 1st and the district is now able to provide summary findings to the community, to the extent that we are permitted, without violating student or staff confidentiality protections.

Our district is legally obligated and ethically responsible to conduct investigations into such matters in a way that protects the anonymity of the potential victims and other students being interviewed. Interviews with 47 out of 55 student members of the VHS football team were conducted on October 10th. Only students who were absent from school at the time of the interviews were not interviewed. Each student was interviewed by one of seven Administrators in an effort to conduct the process efficiently. Those Administrators included the VHS Principal, VHS Assistant Principal, Director of Athletics, Director of Guidance, Director of Curriculum, Director of Special Services, and Supervisor of Humanities. Our Administrators were normed on the interview process to ensure the interviews were conducted as consistently as possible.

Measures were taken to ensure student confidentiality and the length of interviews depended on how much information the student was willing to share. The specific questions asked of all students and a summary of their responses is outlined below. All students were asked the same questions, which were reviewed in advance by our Board attorney. It is important to note, that due to student confidentiality requirements, we cannot publicize any of the narrative commentary that students provided in their explanation to each question. When given the chance to elaborate on responses, the vast majority of the students reported very similar details / examples that impacted them directly or they witnessed. At no time did the interviewers record information that was hearsay. Student responses were recorded in writing. At the end of

each interview, the student was asked to review their responses, verify accuracy, and to sign the document to confirm that.

The district analyzed the data to identify patterns of responses for the whole team versus what starters shared. This analysis was conducted to control if, for example, players filed complaints as a result of being disgruntled about playing time. The results were shared with Dr. Dionisio and our Board attorney the day of the student interviews. A summarized version of student feedback (names redacted, as is our norm) was reviewed with the Board of Education that evening in private session. Based on the student feedback, and after review with the Board attorney, practice for that day was cancelled and an interim head coach announced. Practice resumed the following day, October 11th.

Interviews with all coaches were scheduled / conducted as quickly as convenient for the coaching staff. Those interviews were recorded on audio.

The information collected was reviewed with the Board attorney and the Board of Education throughout the week of October 23rd. The Board met with Dr. Dionisio and our Board attorney on October 30th in private session to discuss the entire investigation including, but not limited to, student interviews and coach responses to the allegations. The results and student feedback were reviewed with all coaches earlier this week. At this point, the investigation is concluded and we are now able to provide this summary report to our community.

The Superintendent's role in such matters is to provide guidance as it relates to process, policy, and law while communicating with district legal counsel and the Board of Education. The Superintendent does not conduct interviews of students or staff but may discuss matters as permitted with staff, parents, and community members. It is incorrect to assume these complaints came into any one Administrator or to assume they stem from Dr. Dionisio or his family. It is a fact that Dr. Dionisio's son is a member of the VHS football program. With continuous review by our legal counsel through each step of this process regarding the sources of the complaints and nature of the allegations, our Board attorney confirms there was no conflict of interest for Dr. Dionisio and his involvement as Superintendent in this investigation.

Many parents have contacted us to learn more and we have accommodated all who wanted to meet, ask questions (to the extent we can answer), and review their son's responses to questions. The issue is not a question of any coach's positive contributions in the past, nor the impact they have had on young lives. We appreciate the many letters and recognize such contributions to many people. Rather, this is about a number of issues that were reported, facts gathered, now with more students and parents adding their voices to those concerns, and attorneys involved on all sides. The people who support the coaches are standing up for people that have given much to our community. No one is questioning any of that.

But there exists a problem and some people have acted irresponsibly while making false claims and assumptions without any real facts. Such comments only fuel more rumors and speculation, which is unfair to all parties involved.

The Board is a governance and oversight body. Throughout this process, the Board has been well informed and has had on-going dialogue with the attorney, been able to review relevant personnel files, the summarized feedback from the students, and listen to the audio

interviews with coaches. Discussions on full details of such matters are prohibited with the public unless staff waives their legal rights to confidentiality. To date, no coach has waived that right.

Our community is going through a challenging time with much emotion on both sides of the matter. We hope that the community will see that the district has taken every effort to follow a fair and thorough process to protect students and ensure a fair outcome for all involved.

Sincerely,

John Quattrocchi
President, Verona Board of Education

The following questions were asked of 47 student athletes on the Verona High School football team with summary findings. Important to note that additional narrative feedback provided by students, which was consistent from the vast majority of the team, is not provided to protect student confidentiality:

1. During practice and or during film sessions, have you ever observed or experienced any of the following behaviors from the head football coach or an assistant coach?
 - a. Grabbing a player's face mask in an inappropriate way. If yes, please explain.

Whole Team: 66% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 73% said yes.

- b. Using inappropriate language, such as cursing at players. If yes, please explain.

Whole Team: 64% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 59% said yes.

- c. Denying water breaks for players. If yes, please explain.

Whole Team: 38% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 50% said yes.

2. Have you ever witnessed the head coach or an assistant coach:
 - a. Make a player cry? If yes, please explain.

Whole Team: 24% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 41% said yes.

- b. Threaten to remove a player from the team if they missed practice due to a health related issue? If yes, please explain.

Whole Team: 26% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 27% said yes.

- c. Encourage players to miss school instead of practice for personal appointments, such as doctor appointments? If yes, please explain.

Whole Team: 34% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 35% said yes.

3. a. Has the head coach or an assistant coach ever made a player run sprints for punishment? If yes, please explain.

Whole Team: 98% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 100% said yes.

- b. If so, has this ever occurred on a hot day? If yes, please explain.

Whole Team: 79% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 82% said yes.

4. Have you ever seen a player pushed to exhaustion where it would be considered unhealthy by the head coach or an assistant coach?

Whole Team: 68% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 76% said yes.

5. Has the head coach or an assistant coach ever reprimanded a player in practice for pulling himself out due to exhaustion or pain? If yes, please explain.

Whole Team: 68% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 77% said yes.

6. Are you encouraged to go to the doctor if you believe you are injured? If yes, please explain.

Whole Team: 11% said no.
Varsity Starters: 9% said no.

7. Have you ever heard the head coach or an assistant coach make inappropriate, derogatory, or insulting comments to a student or call him names?

Whole Team: 36% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 48% said yes.

8. During film review, how are students treated by the head coach and the assistant coaches?

All responses were open ended and varied by student.

9. Have you ever been intimidated by the Verona High School head coach or assistant coaches? If yes, please explain.

Whole Team: 32% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 27% said yes.

10. Do you think any of your teammates have ever been intimidated by the Verona High School head coach or assistant coaches? If yes, please explain.

Whole Team: 53% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 59% said yes.

11. Is anything inappropriate happening in football that you are not comfortable talking about? If yes, please explain.

Whole Team: 100% said no.

12. Have you ever been pressured to attend a practice while you were sick by the head coach or any assistant coach? If so, by whom and please explain?

Whole Team: 36% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 43% said yes.

13. Do you know of any situation in which a member of the football team was criticized for missing practice? If yes, please explain.

Whole Team: 55% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 61% said yes.

14. Has the head coach or any assistant coach ever made you not want to attend school or practice? If yes, please explain.

Whole Team: 45% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 54% said yes.

15. Do you believe everyone on the team is treated equally by the head coach and the assistant coaches? If no, please explain.

Whole Team: 49% said yes.
Varsity Starters: 36% said yes.

16. Is there anything you would like to share that we have not talked about?

All responses were open ended and varied by student.