An Open Letter To The Franklin High School Football Community At Large

The last few weeks have become increasingly difficult for many who love FHS Rebel Football. Concerns have been raised. Opinions stated. Passions stirred.

And now the world is watching us.

We have lived a shared experience that has been treasured for many years. Brought together by the thrill of Friday night lights, high school football, cheerleading, ROTC, classmates, community friends, and the best band around. These experiences represent what we love the most; our families, our children, our community, and our relationships.

As good parents; we’ll fearlessly protect what we hold most dear. As frail human beings, we risk placing our opinions and the demand for justice above those beautiful things, forgetting they will outlast present conflict. And like much in our lives, an honest inventory of our current story will reveal that, truth lies somewhere in the middle.

Having had the privilege of being a (mostly) silent observer of our shared experience, the intention of this letter is to offer perspective, encouragement toward peace, and a call for action. For those unaware, as PDaddyPix, I’ve been a Franklin Football Photographers for 4 years. I’ve taken pictures of your sons, your daughters, your families in the stands, and together we’ve created and captured memories for a lifetime. Apart from one, I’ve stood on the sidelines of every football game from the 2013/14 through 2016/17 season. I feel like I’ve had the best seat in the house, watching my son pursue his passion for lifelong friendships, fun, and football.

In Mid-October one of our parents privately voiced a concern to our head coach. By month’s end, there were public demands for them to pack up their family and leave Franklin. Bookended between these two points are poignant details, of which most are not privy. The surge of reactions and social media posts, my friends, is NOT an accurate representation of who we are, have been, or want to be.

Beyond our shared life on Friday night; each family lives their own, individualized, very personal experience with their children. Because one family has concern and not another; does not mean one is right and the other wrong, one does not cancels the other out; nor does one discount the other.

Truth demands that we allow each other the latitude to have our perspective and voice any concern through the proper channels. Truth does NOT demand that we publicly and firmly position ourselves on either side of a debate. And particularly if it is at the expense of another family’s character, peace, and serenity.

Speaking of Truth, and extrapolating from countless conversations with you over the years; I can tell you with great confidence and certainty that valid, documented, non-capricious concerns abound. Many of you have voiced your concerns to me and others. Many have taken those concerns directly to our coach. Many have escalated those concerns to our athletic director, vice principal over athletics, and our principal. Others have raised concerns with the county office, still others have reached out to the TSSAA in hopes of some remediation to their concerns. Each of these efforts have been met with varying degrees of response, concern, and resolution.
To each their own. Families respond in a variety of ways when exposed to opportunities for correction, recalibration, improvement or expansion. Some have firmly demanded correction and justice for a wrong committed; and have appealed decisions through the prescribed process. Some proceed quietly, and others more vocally. After repeated attempts of civil conversation; some families have simply given up hope. Feeling that meaningful change is unlikely, they press forward; using the experience as a life-lesson and teaching opportunity with their children. Other’s mount herculean efforts, rallying historic levels of community support for future generations of Franklin High Rebels. Case in Point: RebelUp!

Still other families are reserved about sharing their comments and opinions, because they have a child in the program, and want to preserve their experience as the most positive possible. Others remain quiet for fear of some sort of retaliation toward their child. In each of these cases, and the ones omitted…. there’s no judgement call; only a family’s freedom to navigate life on their own terms.

Now to speak very directly to the topic at hand. It is imperative in these situations to have guardrails to guide the conversation. Do standards and guidelines exist that outline behavior and performance expectations? In our case, the answer is yes.

The Williamson County Board of Education publishes a handbook which guides our life together as a school district. It provides pages of guidelines in the form of both Principles which we strive to emulate; along with Laws which are enforceable at the school level and beyond. The Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association (TSSAA) as a guiding organization related to amateur athletics, also has similar documentation critical to this conversation.

Each family has the right and civic duty to read and understand these documents; in particular when you have children within the system and a concerning issue emerges. Here is the source which separates fact from fiction; qualitative/soft data from quantitative/measurable actions; and offers clearly spelled out guidelines for behavior.

In the Fall of 2015 I consulted these documents as a guide for voicing my own personal concerns related to our football program. The documents proved very helpful. I discussed my concerns with two confidants and two attorneys. Obviously, my concerns were quite elevated. When talking with council involved with a similar concern at a nearby high school; the advice I was given was to summon the support of 20+ families, and to file a formal legal complaint. The other option was to pursue a journalistic approach, and to try the situation in the court of public opinion. However, either approach would require the voices of many of the families impacted by this concern.

After “testing the water,” I realized that most of the families would be reticent to add their name to a complaint, for fear of retaliation against their son who was still an active part of the program. However, along the way, I discovered that several families did share the same concerns. Since that time, many of those young men have graduated from the program, and parents are willing to add their story to formulate the larger picture.

In light of the national attention brought to our high school football program in October; today I encourage each family to make a thorough honest inventory of the experiences they have had over the last 5 years within the Franklin High School football program. Determine with your family; confer with your son; ask them to honestly speak of their experience. Then ask yourselves what experience you wish your son had, ask yourselves what hopes you have for our football program in the future. Avoid thoughts that say, “that’s just the way the coach is,” or ‘that’s just football in the south,’ or ‘I don’t have a dog in that hunt anymore, my son is gone.” Your voice matters.
Below this letter you’ll find excerpts from The Board of Education handbook, and TSSAA guidelines. Allow them to offer you guidance in your thought process. I have highlighted (and underlined) various sections that our coach(es) have violated time and time again. I am publicly asking a higher authority to initiate a full investigation; to interview the families effected, and to bring a quick and peaceful resolution to this troubling matter.

It is NOT okay for 14-18 year old boys to live under tyranny, intimidation, anger, rage, vulgarity, emotional and mental trauma, and to be physically thrown to the ground by your coach. It is NOT normal behavior to train young boys to become men by establishing an environment of threat and harassment. It is NOT okay to build a virtual wall between parents and what happens in the locker room and on the practice field, in order to protect what is done and said behind closed doors. It is not okay to be a school yard bully and create a hostile environment where the victims are scared into silence and submission. It is NOT okay to punish a teenager who has a 105-degree temp for missing practice. It is NOT okay to spew profanities on and off the field. It is NOT okay to belittle and undermine. These things are NOT normal, are NOT acceptable, are NOT safe, and are NOT what Franklin Football should be about.

There are some families with whom this will NOT resonate. It does not discount the validity or veracity of the concerns. For those who have not experienced these things; be still. Allow those who have the opportunity to seek remediation for wrongs committed. This does NOT diminish who we are as Franklin Rebels. In fact, the opposite is true. If you discover that these things are in fact true, would you not want them addressed?

Allow the process to unfold. Truth has roots, and will always outlive falsehood. Either way, Franklin High School will be better for it. And in the meantime, be at peace, and

Love one another.

Peter Batarseh
peter@batarseh.net
The educator, believing in the worth and dignity of each human being, recognizes the supreme importance of the pursuit of truth, devotion to excellence, and the nurturing of democratic principles. Essential to these goals is the protection of freedom to learn and to teach and the guarantee of equal educational opportunities for all. The educator accepts the responsibility to adhere to the highest standards.

The educator recognizes the magnitude of the responsibility inherent in the teaching process. The desire for the respect and confidence of the community provides the incentive to attain and maintain the highest possible degree of ethical conduct. The Code of Ethics of the Education Profession indicates the aspiration of all educators and provides standards by which to judge conduct.

**Principle I - Commitment to the Student**

The educator strives to help each student realize his or her potential as a worthy and effective member of society. The educator therefore works to stimulate the spirit of inquiry, the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, and the thoughtful formulation of worthy goals.

In fulfillment of the obligation to the student, the educator:

1. Shall not unreasonably restrain the student from independent action in the pursuit of learning.

2. Shall not unreasonably deny the student access to varying points of view.

3. Shall not deliberately suppress or distort subject matter relevant to the student's progress.

4. **Shall make reasonable effort to protect the student from conditions harmful to learning or to health and safety.**

5. **Shall not intentionally expose the student to embarrassment or disparagement.**

6. Shall not on the basis of race, color, creed, sex, national origin, marital status, political or religious beliefs, family, social or cultural background, or sexual orientation unfairly:
   a. exclude any student from participation in any program;
   b. deny benefits to any student;
   c. grant any advantage to any student.

7. Shall not use professional relationships with students for private advantage.

8. Shall not disclose information about students obtained in the course of professional service, unless disclosure serves a compelling professional purpose or is required by law.
Bullying and bullying-related behaviors (e.g. cyber-bullying, intimidation, hazing, harassment, etc.) are unacceptable behaviors, are strictly prohibited, and will not be tolerated. Behavior that is found to be in violation of this policy shall be subject to discipline, up to and including suspension or expulsion.

Principals shall be responsible for publicizing this policy, including notice to students and employees that this policy applies to behavior at all school-sponsored activities. All WCS employees shall be responsible for implementation of this policy.

Each school shall implement a bullying awareness program.

DEFINITIONS

Bullying: Bullying is defined by Tennessee law as any act that substantially interferes with a student’s educational benefits, opportunities or performance, and has the effect of:

1) Physically harming a student or damaging a student’s property;
2) Knowingly placing the student or students in reasonable fear of physical harm to the student or damage to the student’s property;
3) Causing emotional distress to a student or students; or
4) Creating a hostile educational environment.

Hazing: Hazing is defined by Tennessee law as any act that recklessly or intentionally endangers the mental health, physical health or safety of a student for the purpose of initiation, or as a condition of attaining membership in, or affiliation with, any school-sponsored activity or grade level attainment.

EXAMPLES

Examples of acts which may be considered bullying include, but are not limited to:

1) Overt, repeated acts or gestures made with the intent to harass, ridicule, humiliate, or harm;
2) Physical or psychological intimidation;
3) Stated or implied threats;
4) Use of any language, written or unwritten, hand gestures or other forms of expression aimed at defining a student in a sexual manner or impugning the character of a student based on allegations of sexual promiscuity;
5) Assault of a student, whether physical, verbal, psychological, or emotional;
6) Attacks on personal property; and
7) Communication of any of the above, or an intent to undertake any of the above, whether made in person or by electronic device.
Examples of acts which may be considered hazing include, but are not limited to:

1) Forced consumption of any drink, alcoholic beverage, drug or controlled substance;
2) Forced exposure to the elements;
3) Forced prolonged exclusion from social contact;
4) Sleep deprivation;
5) Forced requirement or encouragement of the wearing or carrying of any obscene or physically burdensome article;
6) Assignment of pranks to be performed;
7) Other such activities intended to degrade, embarrass and ridicule, humiliate; and
8) Any other forced activity that could adversely affect the mental or physical health or safety of a student, or staff member.

Acts may be found to be in violation of this policy whether they are committed in person, in writing, through an agent or intermediary, or communicated or undertaken through electronic means.

REPORTING AND INVESTIGATION PROCEDURE

Each school shall have a reporting procedure which is easily accessed and readily understandable. A bullying offense may be reported by any person. Anonymous reports may be made; however, disciplinary action may not be taken solely on the basis of an anonymous report.

Reports shall be made to the Principal, an Assistant Principal or a teacher. All reports shall be promptly forwarded to either the Principal or an Assistant Principal.

Either the Principal or an Assistant Principal shall promptly investigate and evaluate the merits of the report.

PROHIBITION AGAINST FALSE CLAIMS

Students and employees are prohibited from intentionally submitting a statement they know to be false or intentionally falsely accusing another of bullying or bullying-related behavior. Any student or employee violating this prohibition shall be disciplined.

PROHIBITION AGAINST RETALIATION

Retaliation against a victim, witness, or person with reliable information for reporting a bullying offense or for providing information in any manner is strictly prohibited. Any student or employee violating this prohibition shall be disciplined.
Williamson County Board of Education

Adopted Date:
6/17/02
Rev. 6/20/05;6/19/06;
11/19/07;5/19/08;
8/17/09;Editorial 6/19/14

6.309

ZERO TOLERANCE: DRUGS, DRUG PARAPHERNALIA, ALCOHOL, WEAPONS AND ASSAULT
Page 1 of 3

I. ZERO TOLERANCE OFFENSES

State Law and/or the Williamson County Board of Education has classified certain offenses as requiring a mandatory one calendar year suspension upon a determination by the Principal that a student has committed one of these offenses commonly referred to as zero tolerance offenses. The following are offenses that automatically result in a suspension of one calendar year, except as otherwise prohibited by federal law for students with disabilities. On a case by case basis the Superintendent of Schools may modify the one year suspension for:

a) DRUGS. Students shall not unlawfully possess, handle, transmit, use, be under the influence of, share, or sell drugs or any controlled substances in any way in school buildings, on school grounds, or on other grounds used for school purposes, (including parking lots or athletic facilities), on school buses, or at any school sponsored activity.

“Drug” means any controlled substance, marijuana, legend drug or any other substance whose possession or use is regulated in any manner by any governmental authority.

Exception: Use of tobacco products is not a zero tolerance offense. See policy 1.803 (Tobacco/Free Schools).

b) DRUG PARAPHERNALIA. Students shall not possess, handle, transmit, use, share or sell drug paraphernalia in any way in school buildings, on school grounds, or on other grounds used for school purposes (including parking lots or athletic facilities), on school buses, or at any school sponsored activity. For purposes of this policy, “drug paraphernalia” shall be as defined in T.C.A.§49-6-4202(3).

c) ALCOHOL. Students shall not possess, handle, transmit, use, be under the influence of, share or sell alcohol in school buildings, on school grounds, or other grounds used for school purposes (including parking lots or athletic facilities), school buses or at any school sponsored activity.

d) WEAPONS. Students shall not possess, handle, transmit, use or attempt to use firearms or any dangerous weapon in school buildings or on school grounds, or on any grounds used for school purposes at any time, or in school vehicles and/or buses or off the school grounds at a school-sponsored activity, function or event.

e) ASSAULT. Students shall not physically assault or verbally threaten to assault any school employee or school resource officer while on a school bus, on school property, or on other grounds used for school purposes, or while attending any school activity or event.

II. “REASONED” JUDGEMENT OFFENSES

State law and the WCBOE have identified other zero tolerance offenses that, depending on the individual circumstances, may warrant “reasoned” judgment by the Principal in assigning punishment. These offenses may result in suspensions ranging from 20 days to one calendar year based upon the circumstances and other factors in each case.

a) ASSAULT. Students shall not physically assault or verbally threaten to assault a student, school volunteer or any school visitor while on a school bus, on school property, or on other grounds used for school purposes, or while attending any school activity or event.

Personal NOTATION: No language is used here regarding Teacher/Coach physically assaulting a student. Most likely because it would be 100% unexpected, and would/should never tolerated.
AUTHORITY: Tennessee Human Rights Act; Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972; and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

PURPOSE: To establish a learning and working environment free from harassment.

APPLICATION: All students, employees, third party members of the Williamson County Board of Education, and consultants.

DEFINITIONS: Included within policy.

POLICY:

GENERAL STATEMENT OF POLICY
The Williamson County Board of Education is committed to safeguarding the rights of all students, employees and third parties within the school system, on school campuses, at school events, and on school buses to learn and work in an environment that is free from all forms of harassment and/or sexual harassment.

It is the policy of the Williamson County Board of Education to maintain a learning and working environment that is free from harassment of any type. The Board prohibits any form of sexual harassment or harassment based upon age, religion, disability, color, and/ or race/national origin or any other class protected by law. All persons are required to make a conscientious effort to fully consider and understand the nature and basis of a harassment or sexual harassment complaint.

It shall be a violation of this policy for any student, teacher, administrator or other school personnel of the Williamson County Schools to harass or sexually harass a student, teacher, administrator or other school personnel through conduct or communication of any form as defined by this policy. The school system will act to promptly investigate all complaints and to promptly and appropriately discipline any student or school personnel who is found to have violated this policy, and/or take other appropriate action reasonably calculated to end the harassment or sexual harassment.

For the purpose of this policy, school personnel includes school board members, employees of the Williamson County Schools, agents, volunteers, contractors, or persons subject to the supervision and control of the Williamson County Schools.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 require school districts to have officially adopted policy statements of nondiscrimination on the basis of sex, disability, national origin and race or any other class protected by law.

HARASSMENT DEFINED AND PROHIBITED
A. It is the policy of the Williamson County Board of Education not to discriminate on the basis of sex, race, national origin, color, creed, religion, age, marital status, disability or any other class protected by law in its educational programs, activities, or employment policies as required by the referenced federal and state statutes. Any student or school personnel shall be punished for infractions of this policy when: The harassing conduct is sufficiently severe, persistent or pervasive that it affects the ability of the student or school personnel to participate in or benefit from the educational program or activity or the work environment and/or creates an intimidating, threatening or abusive environment. The harassing conduct has the purpose or effect of substantially or unreasonably interfering with an individual’s academic or work performance.
B. Harassment may include but is not limited to:
   1. Graffiti, notes, or cartoons containing discriminatory language;
   2. Name calling, jokes, or rumors;
   3. Negative stereotypes and hostile acts which are based upon a person’s sex, race, national origin, color, creed, religion, age, marital status, disability or any other class protected by law;
   4. Written or graphic material containing discriminatory comments or stereotypes that is posted or circulated and which is aimed at degrading individuals or members of protected classes;
   5. Threatening or intimidating conduct directed at another because of the other’s race, national origin, color, creed, religion, age, marital status, disability or any other class protected by law;
   6. A physical act of aggression or assault, or other acts of aggressive conduct, upon another because of, or in a manner reasonably related to, an individual’s race, national origin, color, creed, religion, age, marital status, or disability or any other class protected by law.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT DEFINED AND PROHIBITED

A. Sexual harassment consists of unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, sexually motivated physical contact, or other verbal or physical conduct or communication of a sexual nature when:
   Submission to that conduct or communication is made a term or condition, either explicitly or implicitly, of obtaining or retaining employment, or of obtaining an education; or
   Submission to or rejection of that conduct or communication by an individual is used as a factor in decisions affecting that individual's employment or education; or
   That conduct or communication has the purpose or effect of substantially or unreasonably interfering with an individual's employment or education, or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive employment or education environment. Any sexual harassment as defined when perpetrated on any student or employee will be treated as sexual harassment under this policy.

B. Sexual harassment may include but is not limited to:
   1. Sexual advances;
   2. Verbal harassment or abuse;
   3. Subtle pressure for sexual activity;
   4. Touching of a sexual nature, including inappropriate patting or pinching;
   5. Intentional brushing against a student or employee’s body;
   6. Demanding sexual favors accompanied by implied or overt threats concerning an individual’s employment or educational status;
   7. Demanding sexual favors, especially when accompanied by implied or overt promises of preferential treatment with regard to an individual’s employment or educational status;
   8. Graffiti of a sexual nature;
   9. Displaying or distributing sexually explicit drawings, pictures or other written materials, including making and playing sexually explicit audio/video tapes;
   10. Sexual gestures, including touching oneself sexually or talking about one's sexual activities in front of others;
   11. Sexual or “dirty” jokes; or
   12. Spreading rumors about or rating other students as to sexual activity or performance.
Section 9. All coaches must be registered with TSSAA annually and will fall under one of the following categories:

1. Full-time certified teacher (a minimum of 100 school days) of a board of education with a Tennessee state teaching license or the equivalent.

2. Retired educator (five or more years’ experience) with a valid Tennessee state teaching license or the equivalent.

3. Non-faculty coach – Anyone approved by the principal, superintendent, and/or local board of education in the normal course of employment procedures in accordance with applicable state law. A school must pay an annual registration fee of $50.00 per coach. Use of a non-faculty coach who has not met all the requirements listed below or who has not been registered with TSSAA shall result in a fine of $500.00.

4. Classified Employee – Any individual employed by a member school or school system in a position that does not require a teaching license or the equivalent. The use of classified employees as coaches is subject to the following restrictions:
   a. the classified employee must be employed 30 hours or more per week in a non-coaching position and may not be an independent contractor or an employee of an independent contractor;
   b. Although not counted as a non-faculty coach he/she must meet all requirements listed below.

Use of a classified employee coach who has not met all the requirements listed below or who has not been registered with TSSAA shall result in a fine of $500.00.

A. The position shall be advertised and no full-time certified teacher with a teaching license who meets the qualifications required for coaching the specific sport in question is available.

B. Head coaches in football, basketball, baseball, girls’ softball, and track and field must be a full-time certified teacher or a retired educator (see #1 and #2 above) or meet the requirements of subsection E.

C. Head coaches in girls’ volleyball, cross country, golf, wrestling, tennis, girls’ soccer, soccer, and bowling may be full-time certified teachers, retired educators, classified employees, or a non-faculty coach.

D. Assistant coaches may be full-time certified teachers, retired educators, classified employees, or non-faculty coaches. If a school is using a non-faculty coach as an assistant, they are limited to three assistant coaches in football, and two assistant coaches in basketball, baseball, softball, and track. Two non-faculty coaches, one of whom may be a head coach, may be used in golf, cross country, volleyball, soccer, wrestling, bowling, and tennis.

E. A classified employee or non-faculty coach may serve as a head coach in football, basketball, baseball, girls’ softball, and track if that person has five or more years of experience as a coach at a TSSAA or TMSAA member school and has completed the NFHS “Fundamentals of Coaching” and “First Aid, Health, & Safety for Coaches” courses OR the ASEP Coaches Education Course in a TSSAA-approved course combined with the TSSAA/TMSAA Online Coaches Training Session prior to May 15, 2013.

F. Classified employees and non-faculty coaches must complete the NFHS “Fundamentals of Coaching” and “First Aid, Health, & Safety for Coaches” courses online prior to coaching. Coaches who have successfully completed the ASEP Coaches Education Course AND the TSSAA/TMSAA Online Coaches Training Session prior to May 15, 2013, will not be required to take the NFHS courses.

G. All coaches are subject to the TSSAA rules and regulations and must conduct themselves in a manner becoming of a coach and representative of the school. All coaches are responsible to the principal of his/her school. Coaches must realize that they have more responsibilities than the general public to understand the purpose of high school athletics and the principles behind the TSSAA rules, and they must maintain that level of understanding and purpose when dealing with the general public and students. Coaches must be paid entirely from funds approved by either the board of education, governing board of the school, Director of Schools, or the Principal of the school.

Please see FAQ’s on Page 45-62.