

March 18, 2021

RE: Amending Amended BOH regulation that may update guidance on sports

Dear Montgomery County Council Members,

I am Felisa (Sally) Lewis, the mother of Ryne Acheson, a junior who plays football at Winston Churchill High School. I am also the Parent Representative for the WC Football Team (Varsity and JV). On behalf of the ~250 football players and parents affected, I am writing in response to the [Montgomery County Board of Health Regulations issued on March 12, 2021](#), which limits play in our community to “low- and medium-risk sports.” Per the [County's website](#), football is a “high-risk” sport for COVID-19 transmission, so the new order effectively only permits non-contact conditioning and drills in football and prohibits any meaningful football play involving contact (practice, scrimmages, and games) in Montgomery County. In reality, the team has not played together since 2019, and if Montgomery County does not allow for an abbreviated football season right now, it will be at least two years before the team can play again. It is time that the County move forward in accordance with national guidelines permitting youth sports, including football.

As I am sure you are aware, on February 2, 2021, the National Federation of High School Associations (NFHS) revised their [guidance](#) to eliminate tiered risk categories because their Sports Medical Advisory Committee (SMAC) advised that “transmission depends upon multiple factors that cannot be easily accounted for by simply dividing sports into three distinct categories of risk”. Instead, the greatest predictors of transmission among athletes are factors OUTSIDE of direct contact play. As stated in their updated guidance, the 2 greatest predictors are that

- Prevailing community infection rates appear to be the strongest predictor for high school athletes being infected; and
- Proven cases of direct COVID-19 transmission during athletics remain relatively rare.

In addition, there are other factors to consider. Although participants in non-contact sports show lower rates of COVID-19 infection than those in contact sports, participants in outdoor sports show lower rates of infection than those in indoor sports. Also, the majority of sports-related spread of COVID-19 appears to occur from social contact, not during sports participation. The [CDC](#) and the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) have also updated their guidance in the last few weeks regarding youth sports and are consistent with NFHS’ recommendation to use local community rates as the primary measure on which to base decisions about youth sports.

Following suit, the Maryland Sports Commission (MSC) has updated its [position](#) to be consistent with NFHS; that is, “local governing bodies should adhere to the latest updates for a return to safe sports activities by referencing the most up-to-date recommendations from the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) as well as the National Governing Bodies on a sport-by-sport basis, respectively.” They have distanced themselves from their *Return to Play Report and Guideline Recommendation*, which is what the current Montgomery County risk categorization is based upon, stating that it is “no longer a preferred reference” and at no time should it have been considered binding or an “authoritative source for determining or classifying the ability for sports activities to be allowed or executed.”

The Maryland Public Secondary School Athletics Association have also updated its [recommendations](#) on March 10, 2021, advising that decisions about school athletics be based on local community metrics, citing the CDC guidance.

Per the [Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Response website](#), Montgomery County is currently at 3% testing positivity, much lower than other counties in Maryland and steadily decreasing. This is on the lower end of the spectrum nationwide.

In summary, there is no current guidance that supports the use of risk categories or advocates the prohibition of certain sports, including the one from the MSC that the Montgomery County March 12 Resolution is based upon. Instead, all of the leading organizations at the state and national level that provide guidance on youth athletics focus on local community data and balancing the risks with the benefits of sports activity, INCLUDING FOOTBALL, for our kids who have been missing this crucial part of their social and physical development.

Speaking specifically about football, there are ways to mitigate and reduce risk during athletics which Montgomery County Public Schools have already put in place, including daily health check-ins, not sharing equipment, wearing masks during practice, social distancing when not actively engaged in play, prohibiting spectators at practice and games, and continually reminding players of these rules. MCPS has also limited the number of opponents and games to three and the overall season to 5 short weeks.

We ask that the Council revise the County Resolution to allow all sports to engage in meaningful play (practice, scrimmages, and games), including contact sports like football AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. While we understand the conservative approach that our County Executive and Council have taken to get us to where we are today, please do not minimize the negative impact that these restrictions have had on our youth. For over a year, the physical isolation, artificiality of constant virtual interaction, and the inability to engage in social and athletic contact at the group level that is so critical to their overall development has had a severe impact on this generation's mental health and psychosocial development, and it is compounded by seeing other local schools (public and private) in Maryland and Virginia play football without outbreaks or widespread transmission. The effects of this quarantine will be long-lasting.

We recognize that as Councilmembers, you have many competing positions to consider. However, we ask that instead of taking a stance of restriction that you move to one of balance with regards to football. It is impossible to eliminate all risk. Instead, it is important that the Council demonstrate its support of MCPS and the coaches and athletic directors/specialists to which we entrust our kids every day, that they will take and enforce the appropriate precautions that allow for meaningful play but minimize risk as advised by the CDC and NFHS.

Thank you very much for your serious consideration. In lieu of having multiple long letters such as this sent to you, I have asked that parents and players share their personal experiences and the negative impact of not having a football season (not just once in the fall but twice) has had and will have on them and their families. We look forward to your amendment of the March 12 resolution to allow for football in Montgomery County to resume.

Sincerely,

Felisa (Sally) Lewis (felisa.lewis@verizon.net)