

The Political Paradox Of The Mepham Football Scandal

**Issue Study for Politics in Education
EDU 5420 Dr. Frank Smith
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**Submitted by: Doretha C. Brown-Simpson, Charles J. Gonsalves,
Denise C. Lloyd, Johnny W. Moore, Anna Ullmann**

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Abstract

The case study was centered on the hazing incident in Mephram High School during the 2003-2004 school year. Although the setting of the incident occurred in Pennsylvania, the individuals who were involved in the incident were associated with the football team from Mephram High School. Mephram High School, which serves the surrounding communities of North Bellmore and Bellmore, is located in a middle class neighborhood of Nassau County in the town of Hempstead. The political issue was analyzed on the basis of Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making (1997) by Deborah Stone. A content analysis of the findings was reported based on the perspectives of people who had direct or indirect involvement surrounding the issue.

Chapter 1

Introduction

In August 2003, three varsity football players from Mepham High School engaged in sexually assaulting three younger football players during an overnight training camp in Pennsylvania. The criminal acts of these three varsity students had a rippling effect on the entire student population, their school community and educational policy. The purpose of this study was to examine how the polis of Mepham dealt with the hazing incident. This incident became a political issue because it publicly examined contrasting views and policies in education at large; but also, it highlighted how personal, social and bureaucratic interests influenced decision-making. In this study, we will show the impact this hazing incident had on the on the social, economic, political and educational components of the Bellmore-Merrick community. We will examine how belief systems, loyalty and traditions influenced decision making and policy implementation.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

According to Stone, ideas are at the center of all political conflict. In society individuals have goals, preferences, and intentions. There is a collective will and collective effort. There is a public interest. People act in a pre-planned, conscious effort constantly balancing self-interest with the common good or public interest. This is in contrast to a market model of society; a social system in which individuals operate to maximize their own self-interest.

Power is a phenomenon of communities. It is a process that enables individuals to control a sphere of policy in an attempt to subordinate individual self-interest to other interests. It may be an individual or a group interest as well a public interest. Power operates through influence, cooperation and loyalty. It also functions to strategically control information. It is a resource that obeys the laws of passion rather than the laws of matter.

In a paradoxical way, an idea or concept unites people while at the same time dividing them. There are no fixed goals or fixed positions in the polis. The goals of policy are vague, contradictory, and elusive. In the polis, problem definitions are never simply a matter of defining goals and measuring our distance from them. Every description of a situation is portrayed from only one of many points of view. Types of strategic representations for defining and portraying policy problems are symbols, numbers, causes, interests, and decisions. According to Stone, “to become fluent in these languages is to learn to see problems from multiple perspectives and to identify the

assumptions about both fact and values that political definitions don't usually make explicit.(p. 135) Problems in a polis are never solved. At best a temporary resolution is arrived at through the redistribution of resources among competing interests. When the polis recognizes them as satisfactory, the solutions lead to the creation of still better policies.

Policy is more like an endless game of Monopoly. The rational model of policy decision making is clean. The linear movement from problem to solution does not exist in the polis. In the market society, goals provide a single answer to a policy problem(issue). The simple definition evokes a common good. In the polis, there are no problem definitions, fixed goals or fixed positions. It is never simply a matter of defining goals and the individual's stand around the goal. Rather it is the strategic representation of situations constructed to win the most people to one's side and the most leverage over one's opponents. According to Deborah Stone, it is rather filled with emotion and passion, irrationality, self-interest, short sightedness, and raw power. (p. 376) Deborah Stone's model challenges the dichotomy of analysis and politics.

If a solution is unsatisfactory, it leads back to a re-examination of the original goals, problems, and/or alternate solutions. The process is central to policy analysis and according to Stone, this is "the rational attempt to attain objectives." There are four construct policy analysis: equity, efficiency, security, and liberty. In the polis, there is no clear definition. Each contains ambiguities. The standards or common language are continuously constructed. The political fight involves conflicting interpretations of any of these concepts.

Stone identifies problems as encompassing symbols, numbers, causes, interests, and decisions. According to Stone, “symbols” is a set of literary devices; stories with a beginning, a middle and an end. This contains heroes and villains within the context of good and evil. Numbers involve deliberate decisions about what is being counted and how to count the problem. Numbers reflect society’s values determining what is to be included and excluded. In policy debate the strategy of pinpointing the cause is paramount to solving a problem. Stone states that causation tells a different kind of narrative. It is an effort to control interpretations through assigning cause. Interests according to Stone are society’s attempt to mobilize on one side or another. Decisions are employed by political actors when faced with a policy problem. According to Stone political actors in the polis have goals and their decisions are based on weighing the consequences vis-a-vis various alternatives.

Finally the third paradox of Stone’s model is solutions. Inducements, rules, facts, rights, and powers are ongoing strategies for coordinating behavior and structuring relationships to achieve collective purposes. Inducements deal with the realm of changing people’s behavior using rewards, punishments, incentives, and sanctions. Rules are commands to govern behavior and to classify people/situations for granting permissions and entitlements. Facts are used as a conduit for persuasion. You provide people with facts and allow them to draw their own conclusions. Rights are granted by governmental authorities upon individuals, groups of people, and organizations. Powers refer to strategies that impact on the decision making by shifting the power to different groups of people.

The researcher's framework for Stone's model appears in figure 1. The cyclical nature of public policy places power at both the start and end of each cycle. The model depicts the synergy among goals, problems and solutions. Not every manifestation of a goal or problem or solution will be present in every problem or policy decision.

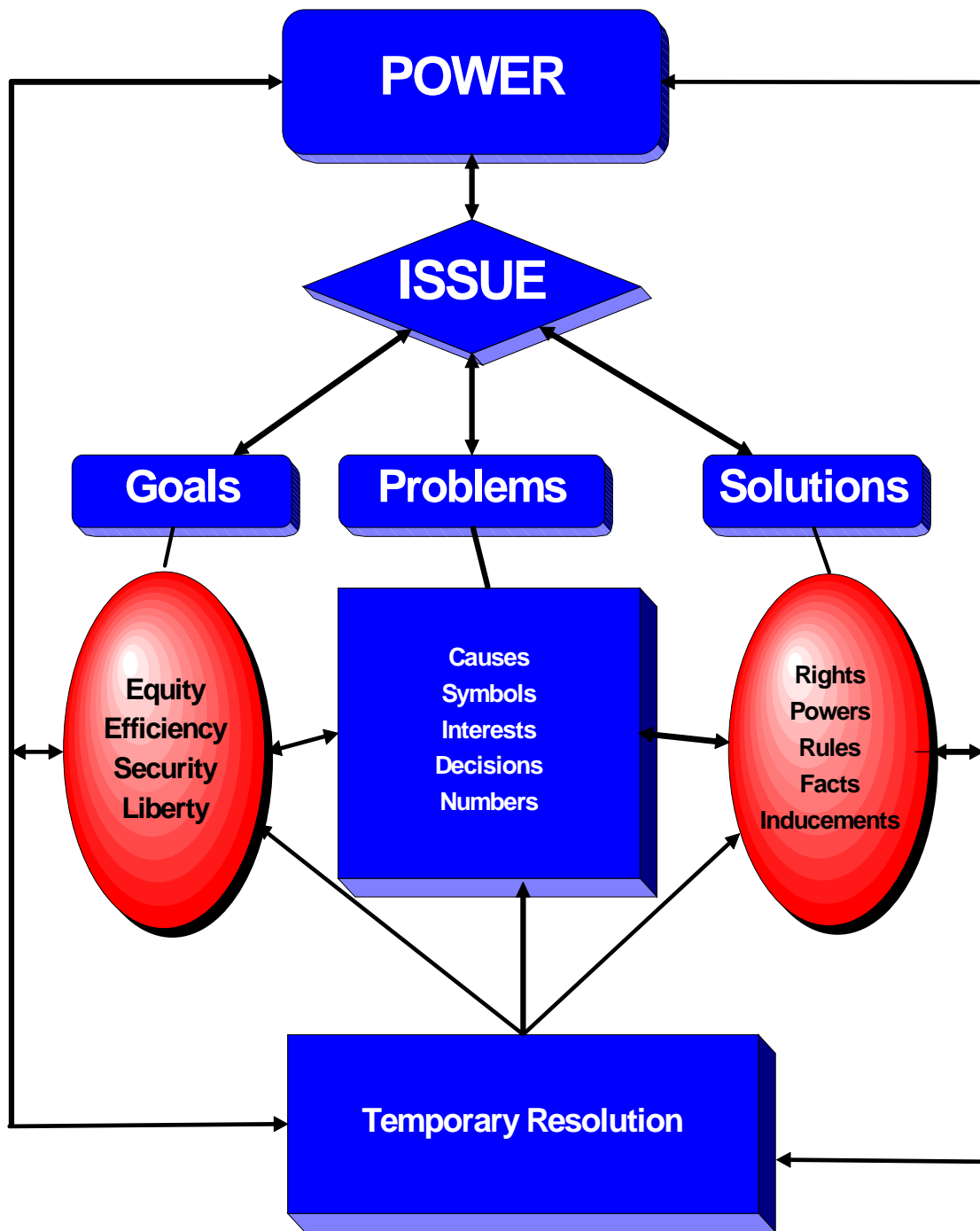


Figure 1

Stone's Framework for the Paradox of Public Policy-Making

Chapter 3

Study Design and Methodology

The methodology for conducting research in this study was done in the form of interviews and articles. Conducting interviews in a qualitative study yields useful information pertaining to facts, feelings, motives, personal beliefs, and behaviors. The intention was to examine the Mephram hazing incident and analyze it according to

Deborah Stone's framework

Three individuals who directly dealt with issues involving the Mephram hazing incident were interviewed. These participants included a former captain of the Mephram football team, a former Mephram coach/teacher/administrator, and a parent/attorney of former Mephram students.

Data was collected from a variety of sources. Information was gathered from newspaper articles in the *New York Times* and *Bellmore Life*. Approximately ten articles came from the *New York Times*, one article from *Bellmore Life*, and one interview article/news broadcast from channel 12 on Long Island.

The information was organized into categories, or bins which reflected the overall themes that were derived from Deborah Stone's work. The paradoxes or opposing views were identified in relation to each category. A summary of the major findings was illustrated in the form of a concept map. Also, a timeline was constructed using the Event Listing timeline model found in *Qualitative Data Analysis* by Miles and Huberman.

As it was previously stated in the former paragraph, quantitative data differs from qualitative data in that it does not explain underlying causes that are presented within the issue. According to Leedy and Ormrod, data is analyzed qualitatively using the content

analysis model. The qualitative researcher is similar to a research instrument in that the researcher has the ability to interpret information according to their own critical understanding (Leedy, p.156). The multiple viewpoints of each of the interviewees demonstrated varied perspectives concerning the political issue.

Over the course of a qualitative investigation, the methodology of the study evolves over time (Leedy, p. 134). The data collection methods must be organized in a sequential manner to separate important information from unimportant details. The record of details is centered on the context of the case. Therefore, several factors are considered including documents, a web page video relating to the historical, economic, and social factors that were affected by the Mephram Hazing case.

Subsequently, the basis for data analysis was formed from the political framework of Deborah Stone. The statements from the interviews and newspaper articles were classified using a sorting tree. The problems included symbols, causes, interests, and decisions. The goals were categorized into equity, security, and liberty. The subcategories of solutions were rules, facts, rights, and powers.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

The political issue that we studied was with reference to a high school hazing incident in August of 2003. Mepham High School, the school in question provided an opportunity for its football program to attend a late summer pre season training camp

The usual provisions for the sleep away camp for Mepham football team were made for the summer of 2003. The Bellmore-Merrick High School District was known for its strong athletic program. This community had strong roots and a rich history promoting their athletic department and their high school football team. Along with the enthusiasm of sports, came a tradition of hazing that was well known, yet down played by faculty and students merely as “safe teasing.” Every year the football season began with a sleep-away training camp for the football team. Every year the football camp was held in August without incident. It was school policy for the boys to sleep in their bunks and the coaches to sleep in separate housing. Nothing different was expected to occur this year.

On August 19th, shortly before the sleep away trip for the football team, a parent complained to the school principal that her son was threatened by a fellow varsity player. He was told, “Don’t even think of sleeping at football camp, and don’t dare tell.” A decision was made, however to allow the older student to attend the camp. The boys on the team attended football training at Camp Wayne in Preston Park, Pennsylvania. Everything seemed to have taken place as expected, and the boys returned from camp.

MEPHAM HAZING TIMELINE

Mephram Hazing Timeline		Emergence of the Problem	Response To The Problem	Temporary Resolutions	Investigation	Legal Outcomes	Resolution	
	Pre Aug. 2003	Sept.1-5, 2003	Sept. 6-12	Sept.17-19	Sept. 20-25	Nov. 2003	March 2004	Post March 2004
Mephram Football Players	3 members of the varsity squad sodomized 3 younger JV players			3 Varsity players suspended from the football team		3 students admitted to responsibility 1 cooperates with the investigation 2 students handcuffed after hearing		
Pennsylvania State Law Enforcement			2 Pennsylvania State police visit Bellmore		DA criticized the school district for not cooperating with the investigation - Subpoenas issued to potential witnesses and district officials	Closed hearing at Juvenile Court, Wayne County, Pennsylvania		
Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District	- Tradition of hazing existed - District Policies prohibited coaches from sleeping in room with players			Bellmore-Merrick Bd of Ed voted unanimously to cancel football season Three football players suspended from school	School District will not release information unless subpoenaed.	Bd of Ed voted unanimously that -the five coaches of Mephram will not coach next year - no more sports camps to be held over several days	District removed coaches of teaching duties and gave them administrative duties	4 Football coaches seek reinstatement with apology and back pay
Grand Jury						Grand Jury rules coaches not criminally negligent		
Mephram Community	Parent complained to Principal that her son was threatened by a varsity football player	Victimized students told parents Parents notified school and Pennsylvania State Police		Protests by parents, football players, cheerleaders and other students regarding the cancellation of the football season	Call made for resignation of Mephram's Principal and Coach Kevin McElroy			Abused players file civil cases against the abusers, the coaches and the school district
New York Legal	The Save Act				Education Law experts back Districts response to inquiry. School is bound by Family Educational Rights Privacy Act			

Figure 2

During the second week of September, parents called the school and notified the Pennsylvania State Police reporting that their sons were victimized at the football camp. Three varsity members of the team sodomized three junior varsity members with broomsticks, golf balls and pine cones. Other younger team members witnessed the attack, but were threatened about telling anyone. The five coaches who accompanied the football team to the Pennsylvania camp maintained that they knew nothing of the abuse that took place. Pennsylvania State Police came to Bellmore to investigate the alleged crimes, but students were not willing to speak. There appeared to be a “shield of silence.” Information wasn’t flowing to follow-up on the allegations made, and the school district wasn’t forthcoming on information about the students.

Pennsylvania state police began to investigate after complaints were filed. Prior to these initial inquiries, Bellmore-Merrick CHSD superintendent of schools, Thomas Caramore reported that 3 football players were suspended from the team. There were no charges implicating the coaching staff during the initial investigation. Stone’s theory of utilizing causation to identify the sources of the problem points to Caramore’s approach.

Several students expressed their dismay over the allegations, claiming that it cast a negative light on the school and its athletic program. School officials denied the ritual existed saying it was “merely a myth that older students had concocted to intimidate younger ones.” The past football team captain corroborated with administration’s claim.

On the other hand, Emily Brass a senior at Mepham said the school had an unsanctioned but well known fall hazing ritual. Yet another senior, Christina Begonja said, “Most reports of hazing at Mepham had been exaggerated.” The grand jury said that traditions of hazing permeated the team and the school, and helped lead to the sexual

attacks. A parent of Mepham graduates related that football in Bellmore/Merrick is like a “sacred cow.”

On September 17, 2003 the Bellmore-Merrick Board of Education voted unanimously to cancel the football season. Three varsity students were suspended from the football team, but were not suspended from school or arrested for the alleged sexual misconduct. The Board’s decision was predicated on the fact that a significant majority of athletes violated the District’s Code of Conduct which requires them to report any type of serious or dangerous violation to a school official. That decision was unpopular with many members of the community. Both parents and students felt the cancellation of the season was too harsh, and that many students were being unfairly punished while only three of the football team members were at fault. Parents of the players focused their anger on the school district rather than on the three varsity players or their teammates. On the other hand, the former Mepham administrator/coach felt the administration had no other choice but to cancel the season. The Mepham parent of the former graduates was adamant about, not only canceling one season, but others as well.

On September 18th, the three varsity players were suspended from school. The long delay created while the school district investigated the case led to much anger from parents and students. According to some parents, “the Board of Education merely hurt innocent children when it voted unanimously to cancel the Mepham Pirates’ varsity and junior varsity football seasons. The board blamed the players for not reporting the allegations and for putting up a shield of silence. Deborah Stone’s framework uses rules for one group to grant or deny permission to another.

School officials refused to provide records to the investigators without a subpoena. Ongoing friction between the school officials and the district attorney's office added to the drama of the hazing allegations that took place at football camp. The district attorney criticized the district for not cooperating with the investigation. A school board member said that the school is bound by the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act and has to protect all of its students. Experts in Education Law supported the District's response to the inquiry. Angry parents, at the school district for canceling the football season, sided with the Pennsylvania District Attorney because the school had not been cooperating with the investigation. The shield of silence can be considered an unwritten rule of the football players rather than the official explanation of withholding information bound by legal constraints. According to the community member we interviewed, if the district was able to, it would have swept the incident under the carpet and kept it hush hush.

At a crowded meeting on November 5, 2003 the Bellmore-Merrick school board voted unanimously to remove the five football coaches from football the following season. This drew cheers from parents, students and community members alike. One lawyer, who represented two of the boys, wanted the board to fire the principal and two of the coaches from their teaching positions. The board also ruled on policies regarding sports camps and fieldtrips: There will be no more sports camps held over several days, the district will review field trip guidelines and hold mandatory meetings between team players and coaches to stress the district's zero tolerance for hazing. In this case a board member, Louis Kruh stated that "we have specific rules that we are supposed to adhere to. Nobody wants to tell. That's keeping us from doing what must be done. That means our hands are tied." A past football team captain claimed this was the failure of leadership on

behalf of the team that no player came forward to alert supervisory personnel of any problem.

Early in March, a grand jury reported that the five Mephram coaches were not criminally negligent during the football camp incident because they did not know what was going on. The grand jury further indicated that the traditions of hazing permeated the school and team and that district policies which prohibited the coaches and players from sleeping in the same cabin greatly contributed to the sexual attacks that took place during the August football camp. The Bellmore Merrick School District consequently voted unanimously to dismiss all five football coaches in a November meeting. This was met with agreement from parents, students, and community members. Many felt that two of the coaches and the high school principal should be dismissed from their positions. The consensus feeling was that the coaches were responsible for the students' safety and were not actively engaged in supervising while the assaults took place. Mr. Kelly, the defense attorney said, "Ultimately they're responsible for the kids on the trip, and sitting in their bunks while the kids are assaulted is not responsible. According to the former Mephram administrator we interviewed, "this happened under their watch." The former football captain put the blame elsewhere. He felt the team lacked leadership... the possibility of one or two individuals, whoever it is coming forward and saying, "No, this is wrong!" No, this doesn't happen; this is how it's going to be. I put a lot of the blame on the leadership of the team... If something like this would have happened, one person like that wouldn't have sat there afraid to speak up. He would have said, "Guys this is wrong, stop doing this!" Many Mephram High School teachers and staff were in support of the coaches "Something like this could have happened under the supervision of any

teacher, any club advisor, etc...” said Nicole Holling, a biology teacher. Yet the community parent of Mephram intoned, “They should never work as coaches again!”

In November a Pennsylvania judge ruled that the case be handled by the juvenile system rather than the adult justice system. The three defendants who were charged would only face penalties ranging from probation to juvenile detention until the age of 21.

In March of 2004, the Bellmore-Merrick School District removed the two head coaches from their teaching positions but they continued to work for the district under administrative assignments. The coach’s attorney cited that his clients were not treated fairly and without due process. Mr. Caramore, Superintendent of Schools said the grand jury’s report as well as information gathered from other sources “had prompted him to pull the coaches from class. Defense lawyer Rubin stated, “We’re happy to see they realize the coaches shouldn’t be around students.”

Four of the coaches sought reinstatement but were denied by the school district. “We did our jobs. We followed district policy,” said Kevin McElroy, the former head coach. The grand jury did not find them criminally negligent rather, they ruled that the coaches had failed to supervise the players. The attorneys for the victims claim Coach Kevin McElroy and other school officials did not do enough to prevent the sexual abuse from happening...” The district said the decision was made “in the best interest of the students at Mephram High School,” but the coaches said it only added another layer of stigma to their lives.

Conceptual Map
Mephram Hazing Incident
Figure 3

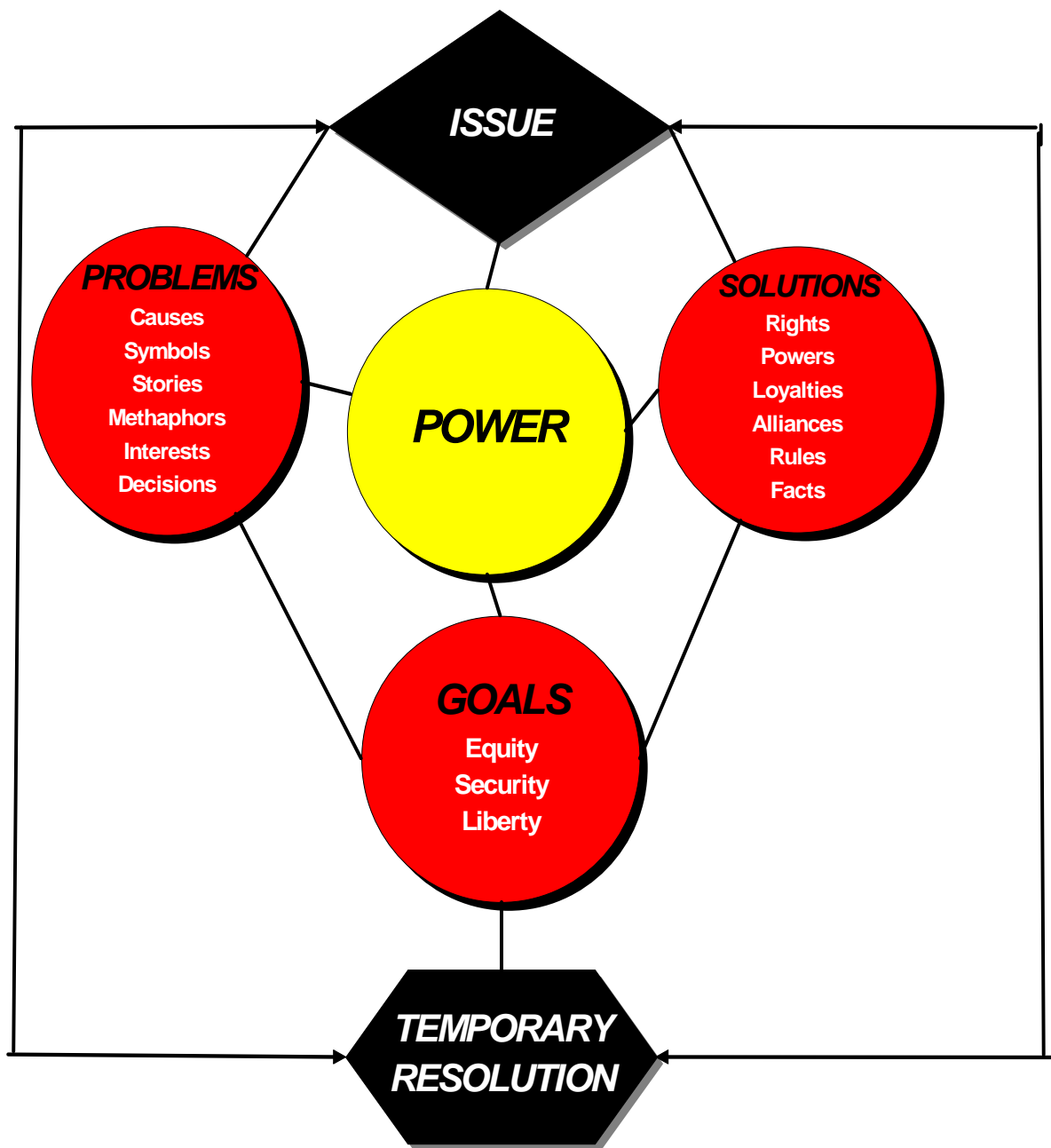


Figure 4: Visual Representation of the Mephram Hazing Incident

Statements from Interviews in relation to Deborah Stone's framework

Problems - Causes
The ritual of hazing existed within the football culture.
There was a prior disciplinary history of the varsity player.
Not enough was done to protect students even though the Principal and Coach had been made aware of threats prior to Camp Wayne.

Problems - Symbols
Mephram has a fine football tradition.
Mephram showed pride in the football tradition.
The initiation around the football culture included teasing, gagging and name-calling.
Hazing was a sacred cow initiation right.
Coach McElroy was a father figure.
Generations of football families were coached by Coach McElroy.
A tough guy image existed as part of the strong football spirit.
There was a lack of supervision even though the writing was "on the wall".

Problems - Decisions
The alleged abusers should have been barred from the camp.
The alleged abusers should have been suspended from school immediately after sexual abuse allegations were made.
The decision on not allowing camp to take place should have been decided.
Coaches should have patrolled the camp bunks thoroughly based on previous threats and should not have slept in separate areas from the children.

Solutions - Rules
The coaches and administrators claimed that they followed the rules and did everything that was supposed to be done.
Permission forms were signed. Meetings were held between student parents and coaches.
The coaches followed the rules for field trips.

Solutions - Facts
The perpetrator threatened the junior varsity player at the water fountain prior to the camp, saying "You just wait until you go to camp...you won't sleep."
Administrators withheld information.
Investigation revealed that more and more players knew about it.
As a result of the incident, education policies changed.

Solutions - Powers
The former football captain felt that it was the captains' failure that the abuse was not prevented.

Figure 5: Visual Representation of the Mephram Hazing Incident

Statements from newspaper articles in relation to Deborah Stone's framework

Problems - Causes
Emily Brass, a senior at Mephram, said the school had an unsanctioned but well known fall hazing ritual that happened on the first Friday of the school year.
A significant majority of the Mephram football team, varsity and junior varsity, has violated the district's code of conduct, Article 7, which requires that all students are expected to report criminal, serious or dangerous violations under the code of conduct to school officials.
The BOE blamed the players for not reporting the allegations and for putting up a shield of silence.
The spiraling melodrama at Mephram is part of a broader terrain of ritualistic hazing that experts say are becoming more violent and more outrageous.
The grand jury said that traditions of hazing permeated the team and the school, and had helped lead to the sexual attacks.
The grand jury said that the players were left unsupervised for two and a half hours at a time.

Problems - Decisions
Parents called the school to report the incidents.
The Bellmore-Merrick BOE voted unanimously to cancel the year's football season.
Students were initially suspended from the team, but not from school.
Three players were subsequently suspended from school.
The BOE did not forward information to the DA when initially requested.
The principal allowed one of the accused to attend camp after a complaint was filed by a concerned parent.
The five coaches were not allowed to coach the team the next year.
The BOE ruled that there would be no more sports camps such as the five-day outing.
The two coaches employed by the district were relieved of teaching duties and given administrative duties with no student interaction.
The grand jury found that the coaches did not commit any crimes.
The BOE decided that the school district will review field trip guidelines and mandatory meetings between players and coaches to stress the district's zero of tolerance of hazing.

Solutions- Rules
Article 7 of the Code of Conduct requires that all students are expected to report criminal, serious or dangerous violations under the code of conduct to school officials.
Shield of silence by students can be considered an unwritten rule of the football players.
The school is bound by the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, and has to protect the privacy of all of its students, ranging from victims to their suspected attackers.
All parties involved had to respond by complying to the subpoenas.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

(Denise C. Lloyd, Johnny W. Moore, Anna Ullmann)

There is no doubt that all of the elements in the Mepham Football Team Hazing Incident demonstrate political conflicts: between individuals, between individuals and bureaucracy and between institutions. The values held by the players, the educational institutions, the coaches, the legal bureaucracy and the community at large are constantly challenged. With each challenge follows a debate and decisions are made which are attempts to solve the problems by formulating policies and solutions. Just as Stone proposes, however, there are many temporary solutions to the problems that emerge and we seldom come to a resolution.

The decisions that the Bellmore/Merrick Central High School District Board of Education, in conjunction with the Mepham School administration were at the heart of the controversy that tore the community apart. There is a constant flux between power and policy. The individual with the most influence at the time, usually gets the upper hand in creating policy. The principal's decision to allow the problematic football player to attend camp is an example of this.

Hazing is about power. It is about an upper-classman demonstrating his/her superiority, his strength, his knowledge his influence and the cooperation and loyalty of other peers. The policy created by this intense, yet false sense of power, was solid enough to result in the silence of many players who witnessed the physical abuse that took place in August of 2003. This power is not senseless, but is goal oriented.

Acceptable goals would be respect, leadership and comradery. But hazing in itself is not acceptable. It goes against policies which guarantee the safety of all individuals.

In reference to the Mephram football players, the power sought by hazing bumped heads with the power held by the football coaches and that of the Bellmore-Merrick High School District. The coaches were long-time established and well respected educators. They proved many times that they could command the respect and trust of their players. They were the students' academic and physical coaches. They were teachers. The players and their parents held them in high esteem, and trusted them. Coaches have a lot of power. They influence school policy as well as school morale and administrative decisions. The goals of respect, leadership and comradery mentioned earlier were goals the coaches hoped the players would achieve under their leadership and influence. When the actions of three of their players jeopardized the physical safety of other players, and resulted in a criminal investigation, the coaches, the players and the policies under which they operated were scrutinized and all the people involved became hot targets of political debate.

The Board of Education's decision to suspend the accused football players from school and cancel the football season was made to demonstrate the school's intolerance of hazing, punish the players for not coming forward with the information and to limit public embarrassment. Only after the outcry of the press, community and general public did they respond in a proactive manner. Their later decision to relieve the coaches of their teaching duties even though the grand jury ruled they were not criminally negligent, was a direct response to the influence of parents in the community who wanted the coaches to bear some responsibility for the hazing incident taking place during their

watch. The coaches' steady pursuit to be reinstated is fueled by their reliance on their historic reputation and the influence they had maintained with the community at large.

The political argument of how this could have happened in the first place constantly switched from the principal's lack of preventive action, to the tradition of hazing in the high school, to the district's policies which prevented the coaches from sleeping in the same units with the players, to the coaches' lack of supervision. There were no definitive causes of the problem because there were too many variables inherent to the history or pre-existing state of the hazing incident. All of the blaming began to tear the community apart, but at the same time, allowed issues to be addressed which would fit the needs of the community and establish new policies.

When the Board of Education took a proactive stance to this incident, they pointed to all sorts of causes to lay blame on the team and their coaches. The accusations, (such as, "no player came forward" to report or validate the allegations, or the "shield of silence") did not address the underlying problems. The major problems had to do with a total lack of supervision by adults for their teenage charges. This lack of supervision and lack of responsibility continued throughout the criminal investigation and after the charges were handed down. The coaches did not and do not take responsibility. The administration changed many of their policies regarding overnight trips, supervision of students, etc.

Finally, this incident has forced the community to take a good look at itself. Community/parent groups have been created to serve as watchdogs. Sensitivity and character virtue workshops have been established and forums have taken place. All in all, there exists a tremendous amount of mistrust and animosity. An atmosphere now

exists of “never again” on our watch and, if so, it will be handled openly and expeditiously.

Stones conceptual framework was useful in analyzing the volley between the emergence of a problem and the many stages of trying to establish policy which would satisfy the goals of the collective. What we didn’t address in this study was to investigate the goals and problems addressed in previous policy making and compare them to the elements involved in the process of creating current policy. This would afford the researcher the ability to compare how rights, powers and rules changed over time.

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APPENDIX 1
NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Copyright 2003 The New York Times Company
The New York Times

September 12, 2003 Friday
Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section B; Column 5; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 5

LENGTH: 483 words

HEADLINE: Football Players on L.I. Face Abuse Accusations in Hazing

BYLINE: By PATRICK HEALY and FAIZA AKHTAR

BODY:

Members of the Mepham High School football team on Long Island have been accused of sexually and physically abusing their younger teammates in a hazing ritual at a summer training camp in Pennsylvania, school officials and prosecutors said yesterday.

No one has been arrested or charged, and officials would not detail the allegations against the players. They would only say that an investigation had begun, and a Pennsylvania State Police spokesman said that two investigators had come to Long Island to interview possible victims and suspects.

None of the coaches have been implicated, said Thomas Caramore, superintendent of the Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District. Mr. Caramore said three players had been suspended from the team, the Pirates, but not from school.

The abuse allegations stem from the football team's annual preseason trip to Camp Wayne in Preston Park, Pa. A former team member said the players would spend five to six days practicing at the camp and would sometimes initiate new team members by giving them "swirlies" -- dunking their heads into a toilet and flushing.

"We never really did it as bad as this," said the former team member, a recent Mepham graduate. "It's just to get everyone together as a team, that's the whole point of it."

The investigation began last week when parents called the school to report the incidents, Mr. Caramore said. Mark R. Zimmer, the district attorney of Wayne County, Pa., said the football players had been reluctant to cooperate with the investigation.

News of the allegations, first reported yesterday in Newsday, rippled through the school in Bellmore, as did rumors about what had happened at Camp Wayne last month and the effect it might have on the team or coaches. Students walking home yesterday afternoon brushed away reporters and said they had been told by school officials not to talk about the allegations.

But one student, Alex Longo, 16, said the allegations had cast a shadow over Mepham.

"It's put a damper on the reputation of our school, and people are looking at the school as if it's a bad place for children," Mr. Longo said. "It's upsetting everyone."

The team still has a game scheduled this weekend, Mr. Caramore said, and the players trotted out to practice yesterday afternoon. Scott Tompkins, 16, said the Mepham Pirates had fallen short of a championship title last year, and the school had high hopes this year.

"Now this happens," Mr. Tompkins said. "Everyone is wondering, and we're all down about this."

Emily Brass, 17, a senior at Mepham, said the school had an unsanctioned but well-known fall hazing ritual that happened on the first Friday of the school year. Dubbed Freshman Friday, older students walk the halls and shove freshmen against lockers, Ms. Brass said.

School officials denied the ritual existed, saying it was merely a myth older students had concocted to intimidate younger ones.

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September 12, 2003 Friday

Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section B; Column 5; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 5

LENGTH: 483 words

HEADLINE: Football Players on L.I. Face Abuse Accusations in Hazing

BYLINE: By PATRICK HEALY and FAIZA AKHTAR

BODY:

Members of the Mepham High School football team on Long Island have been accused of sexually and physically abusing their younger teammates in a hazing ritual at a summer training camp in Pennsylvania, school officials and prosecutors said yesterday.

No one has been arrested or charged, and officials would not detail the allegations against the players. They would only say that an investigation had begun, and a Pennsylvania State Police spokesman said that two investigators had come to Long Island to interview possible victims and suspects.

None of the coaches have been implicated, said Thomas Caramore, superintendent of the Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District. Mr. Caramore said three players had been suspended from the team, the Pirates, but not from school.

The abuse allegations stem from the football team's annual preseason trip to Camp Wayne in Preston Park, Pa. A former team member said the players would spend five to six days practicing at the camp and would sometimes initiate new team members by giving them "swirlies" -- dunking their heads into a toilet and flushing.

"We never really did it as bad as this," said the former team member, a recent Mepham graduate. "It's just to get everyone together as a team, that's the whole point of it."

The investigation began last week when parents called the school to report the incidents, Mr. Caramore said. Mark R. Zimmer, the district attorney of Wayne County, Pa., said the football players had been reluctant to cooperate with the investigation.

News of the allegations, first reported yesterday in Newsday, rippled through the school in Bellmore, as did rumors about what had happened at Camp Wayne last month and the effect it might have on the team or coaches. Students walking home yesterday afternoon brushed away reporters and said they had been told by school officials not to talk about the allegations.

But one student, Alex Longo, 16, said the allegations had cast a shadow over Mepham.

"It's put a damper on the reputation of our school, and people are looking at the school as if it's a bad place for children," Mr. Longo said. "It's upsetting everyone."

The team still has a game scheduled this weekend, Mr. Caramore said, and the players trotted out to practice yesterday afternoon. Scott Tompkins, 16, said the Mepham Pirates had fallen short of a championship title last year, and the school had high hopes this year.

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September 18, 2003 Thursday

Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section B; Column 1; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 8

LENGTH: 685 words

HEADLINE: After Allegations of Abuse, A Football Season Is Canceled

BYLINE: By PATRICK HEALY

DATELINE: NORTH MERRICK, N.Y., Sept. 17

BODY:

The Bellmore-Merrick Board of Education voted unanimously tonight to cancel this year's football season at a Long Island high school that had been reeling from allegations that three older football players sexually abused freshman teammates.

The decision affects both the varsity and the junior varsity teams at Mepham High in Bellmore. The school's first game of the season was to have been on Saturday.

"A significant majority of the Mepham football team, varsity and junior varsity, has violated the district's code of conduct, Article 7, which requires that all students are expected to promptly report criminal, serious or dangerous violations of the code of conduct to school officials," said Charles Reinhardt, the board's president, reading from a handwritten statement.

The board met for more than four hours behind closed doors before emerging with the decision, and members left without comment.

The board's decision was the latest development in what has become a rocky start to the school year here, where one of the first lessons of the semester has become how to live inside a scandal.

Students at Mepham say they can deal with the unending stream of reporters and TV cameras, and with the vague administrative announcements about tragic events. But the absence of answers has started to wear on some of them.

Three weeks since the abuse is alleged to have happened at a football training camp in Pennsylvania, no students have been arrested or suspended from school, although three players suspected in the abuse have been suspended from the team.

"We're certainly upset about the whole incident," Alyse Middendorf, a board member, said in a telephone interview this morning. "It was a heinous incident, and we'd certainly like to take some action."

The teams continued to practice throughout the week. But students said school administrators canceled a pep rally that traditionally precedes a game, and the public address announcements urging students to attend games have been absent.

Prosecutors and the police still refuse to provide details of the allegations, but an article in Newsday and conversations with several students who know the suspects paint a disturbing picture. According to those sources, three members of the varsity squad sodomized three younger junior varsity players with broomsticks, golf balls and pine cones. One of the students was so injured that he required surgery, Newsday reported.

Other members of the team witnessed the attacks, which occurred in a bunkhouse at Camp Wayne in Preston Park, Pa., and the younger boys were threatened with reprisals if they told, the students said.

The younger boys told their parents about the attacks after returning home, and their parents notified the school and the state police in Pennsylvania, school officials said.

Thomas Caramore, superintendent of the Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District, said none of the coaches who had accompanied the team to the camp knew of the abuse.

Now, some school officials say their investigation has been stymied by silence. A board member, Louis Kruh, said that no students were willing to make written statements, and that as a result, the district could not suspend anyone.

Two state police investigators from Pennsylvania visited Bellmore, and Mark R. Zimmer, the district attorney of Wayne County, Pa., said he did not anticipate making any arrests in the next few days.

"We've got allegations that involve a bunch of children, all of whom have their whole lives ahead of them," Mr. Zimmer said in a telephone interview today. "No matter which side of the equation they're on, parents are thinking, 'This is going to ruin my kid.' "

A group of junior varsity and varsity football players hanging out Tuesday night near Mephram High School said they had been told not to talk about the case. But the players, who said they had not witnessed the attack, said the team would be meeting with the police this week.

"A couple kids on the team did it, but the whole team's getting punished," said Danielle DeFina, a sophomore who has friends on the team. "I think it's ridiculous."

September 19, 2003 Friday

Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section B; Column 5; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 1

LENGTH: 793 words

HEADLINE: School District In Hazing Case Draws Anger From Parents

BYLINE: By PATRICK HEALY

DATELINE: BELLMORE, N.Y., Sept. 18

BODY:

The football season is lost at Mephram High School, but the parents of players are not blaming their children or the three seniors who are suspected of sexually abusing their freshman teammates. Instead, many are focusing their anger squarely on the school district.

Meanwhile, a school official confirmed last night that the three players had been suspended from school. They previously were

suspended from the football team, but were allowed to attend classes. There have been no arrests in the case.

In interviews today, parents said the Board of Education merely hurt innocent children when it voted unanimously on Wednesday to cancel the Mepham Pirates' varsity and junior-varsity football seasons. The board blamed the players for not reporting the allegations and for putting up a shield of silence, but parents said their children felt threatened because the suspects had continued to attend school.

"How can you let a threat walk around school when you're asking these kids to give you information?" said Todd Frenchman, a parent of a football player. "They're not going to testify or give any kind of comment. They're not silent. They're scared."

The parents of one junior-varsity player said the school failed to guard against the abuse, which prosecutors said occurred during the last week of August at a Pennsylvania camp where the team was training for the coming season.

The parents, who insisted on remaining anonymous out of concern for their son's safety, said their son had been threatened by one of the students suspected in the abuse before the camp was held. The older player told their son, " 'Don't even think of sleeping at football camp, and don't dare tell,' " the parentssaid.

The parents said they reported the threat to Mepham's principal, John F.Didden, on Aug. 19, four days before the team left for camp. The parents asked Mr. Didden to bar the older player from camp. But the parents said Mr. Didden told them the older boy would be allowed to attend. Mr. Didden did not respond to messages seeking comment, and board members reached by telephone this evening said they had no knowledge of the parents' allegations. But board members stood by their vote to cancel the season, which was to start on Saturday.

"We have specific rules the kids are supposed to adhere to," said Louis Kruh, a board member. "Nobody wants to tell. That's keeping us from doing what must be done. That means our hands are tied."

Mr. Kruh said it had been hard to make such a punitive decision that affected about 60 players.

"The unfortunate part of it is a lot of innocent youngsters who are looking forward to playing ball are going to be hurt by this," he said.

Parents and students lingered on that point today, as they protested the season's cancellation. This morning, dozens of football players, cheerleaders and other students walked out of the school and onto the football field, where the players scrimmaged. Shouts of "Go Rebels!" and applause from their peers provided the accompaniment.

"We're just trying to show our unity," said Candace DeFina, who watched from the bleachers. "We want everybody to know that we're going to stick together, that we're going to be a team."

After the scrimmage, as students trickled back into school, one Mepham player said the players were ultimately to blame.

"We did it to ourselves," said the player, who insisted on anonymity, though he added that the punishment seemed too harsh. "We're upset. This has been our dream since we were freshmen. I guess dreams aren't supposed to be sometimes."

The spiraling melodrama at Mepham is part of a broader terrain of ritualistic hazings that experts say are becoming more violent and more outrageous. In May, a hazing in suburban Chicago drew national attention when high school seniors were filmed throwing feces, paint and mud at junior girls.

Hank Nuwer, a professor at Franklin College in Indiana who studies hazing, said 55 to 65 hazing incidents were reported each year. Since 1995, he has tracked 45 cases of hazing involving sexual assault.

For years, students have learned about these rituals from parents, coaches and older friends, but many are now turning to movies like "Dazed and Confused"-- which depicts hazing by paddling -- for inspiration or Internet bulletin boards to brag about hazing or being hazed, Professor Nuwer said.

Student after student at Mepham High School said the sports teams had few, if any, formal initiation rituals. Christina Begonja, a senior, said most reports of hazing at Mepham had been exaggerated. "Hazing's just like bullying around," Ms. Begonja said today as she finished her lunch at a delicatessen near the school. "It's teasing and saying, 'Oh, you're a ninth grader. I'm bigger than you.' Stupid high school stuff."

September 25, 2003 Thursday

Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section B; Column 5; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 5

LENGTH: 553 words

HEADLINE: Education Law Experts Back District's Response to Inquiry

BYLINE: By PATRICK HEALY

BODY:

Experts in education law say a Long Island school district acted wisely when it refused to turn over information from its own investigation into allegations that three varsity football players sexually abused younger teammates at a preseason training camp in Pennsylvania.

Mark R. Zimmer, the district attorney in Wayne County, Pa., who is handling the case, criticized the Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District during a news conference on Monday for not cooperating with the criminal investigation. School officials said they were bound by federal privacy laws and could not release student records without a subpoena or the consent of students' parents.

The friction between school officials and the district attorney was the latest episode in the slowly unfurling saga of abuse allegations on the Mepham High School Pirates football team. Mepham is one of three high schools in the district.

Jay Worona, the lead counsel for the New York State School Boards Association, said there are ongoing conflicts between the police, looking for information, and schools, looking to protect student privacy.

Thomas Caramore, the Bellmore-Merrick superintendent, said yesterday that five football coaches and the Mepham principal received subpoenas from a Pennsylvania grand jury investigating the allegations. Mr. Caramore said the district waited for the subpoenas and planned to cooperate with the investigation.

"That's exactly what they should be doing," Mr. Worona said in a telephone interview. "They'll give the information, but they'll do it under court order. They won't be in violation of any provision of law."

District officials have said they are constrained by the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, a federal law that prohibits schools from divulging information from a student's educational record.

"It frustrates law enforcement people and district attorneys," Mr. Worona said, but he added that schools face severe consequences if they wrongfully disclose student information, making them vulnerable to civil-rights lawsuits.

Mr. Zimmer and members of the Bellmore-Merrick Board of Education have said they have been frustrated by the silence surrounding the case, which stems from the varsity and junior-varsity teams' annual weeklong trip to Camp Wayne in Preston Park, Pa.

Prosecutors believe that the three varsity players sodomized three younger players with pine cones, golf balls and a broomstick during the trip, in late August. No one has been arrested, but the three older players have been suspended from school, and the board of education voted last week to cancel the school's football season, blaming "a significant majority" of students who did not report the incident to school officials.

Although school officials have insisted the coaches were unaware of any reports of abuse at Camp Wayne, an incident just before the camp has angered parents, some of whom have called for Mepham's principal, John F. Didden, and varsity football coach, Kevin McElroy, to resign.

The parents of one junior-varsity player told school officials that their son-- who was not among the victims -- had been threatened by one of the varsity players suspected of being involved in the attack. The older player was allowed to attend camp, but school officials have said he was warned about his behavior.

November 22, 2003 Saturday

Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section B; Column 6; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 5

LENGTH: 465 words

HEADLINE: 2 Athletes In Abuse Case To Undergo Evaluation

BYLINE: By GINA THACKARA

BODY:

Two Long Island teenagers accused of sexually abusing younger teammates at a summer football camp were taken away in handcuffs yesterday after a closed hearing in juvenile court in Wayne County, Pa.

Because the judge ordered that the proceedings remain secret, the county district attorney, Mark Zimmer, would not say if the defendants, varsity football players at Mephram High School in Bellmore, N.Y., had admitted the charges in court.

After a ruling this month that three Mephram football players charged in the case would be handled in the juvenile and not adult justice system, people close to the case said that all three defendants had admitted responsibility for the attacks. One of the three cooperated with the prosecution, according to lawyers involved in the case.

Mr. Zimmer, in a statement outside the courthouse in Honesdale, Pa., said that the investigation was continuing and that he might file charges against two other members of the football team.

The tearful aunt of one victim, who would not give her name out of concern that her nephew's identity would then become known, said that the two accused teenagers were to undergo psychological evaluation and that the court had up to 60 days after that to determine the punishment that would be imposed. The pair could face a minimum penalty of probation to the maximum of juvenile detention until they are 21.

The three defendants had been charged with felonies and misdemeanors, and if tried as adults could have faced 20 years in prison.

The case, which has split the Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District, began in late August, when 60 players and 5 coaches drove to Camp Wayne in rural Preston Park, Pa., to train for the coming season. It was there, prosecutors say, that three freshmen, ages 13 and 14, were sodomized with a broomstick, pine cones and golf balls.

After reports of the case became public in September, the football season was canceled and the Board of Education removed all the coaches from football duties.

After yesterday's hearing, officers put the two handcuffed teenagers into the back of Sheriff's Department cars and drove away from the

courthouse. Relatives of the victims stood outside the courthouse, and a bank of reporters waited for information.

The aunt said that at least one of the accused teenagers had sat on her nephew and on the two other victims as each was attacked.

"That big heavyweight who sat on my nephew and the other two boys will be walking around like a good citizen," she said. "And my nephew will never be the same. He'll never feel safe; he'll always be looking over his shoulder wondering when the next attack will come."

The woman said the victims' families would return to Wayne County for every court session involving the attacks until the case is resolved.

September 23, 2003 Tuesday

Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section B; Column 5; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 1

LENGTH: 719 words

HEADLINE: L.I. District Is Criticized In Hazing Case

BYLINE: By PATRICK HEALY

BODY:

The Long Island school district where three varsity football players are suspected of sexually abusing several younger teammates has not cooperated with a criminal investigation into the allegations, the Pennsylvania prosecutor who is handling the case said yesterday.

Mark R. Zimmer, the district attorney of Wayne County, Pa., said yesterday that a grand jury is looking into the abuse allegations and has issued about a dozen subpoenas to potential witnesses and officials of the Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District. School officials had refused to provide records to investigators without a subpoena, Mr. Zimmer said.

"I am surprised at the school's lack of cooperation," Mr. Zimmer said at a news conference in Honesdale, Pa. "This has not been an easy investigation."

The school district bristled at Mr. Zimmer's criticism. In a prepared statement, the district said that privacy laws prevented it from releasing student information without parental consent or a subpoena, adding that no one from Mr. Zimmer's office had ever contacted school officials.

"We do not understand why the Pennsylvania district attorney's office has waited until now to serve a subpoena," the district said.

A school board member, Ted Tanenbaum, said the school is bound by the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, and has to protect the

privacy of all of its students, ranging from victims to their suspected attackers.

"We have rules and regulations that we have to adhere to," Mr. Tanenbaum said.

Prosecutors say the abuse occurred during the last week of August at a camp in Preston Park, Pa., where about 60 members of the Mepham High School Pirates varsity and junior varsity football teams were training for the coming season. There, three young players were apparently sodomized with pine cones, a broomstick and golf balls, Mr. Zimmer said, confirming earlier reports from students and friends of the suspected attackers.

No one has been arrested in the case, but the three older players suspected of the abuse have been suspended from school, a school officials has said. Last week, the Bellmore-Merrick Board of Education canceled the football season because, the board president, Charles H. Reinhardt, said, "a significant majority" of players did not report the incident to school officials.

Now, process servers from the Nassau County district attorney's office are handing out the interstate subpoenas, whose recipients will appear before a Nassau judge on Friday for a show-cause hearing to determine whether they must comply with the subpoenas, said Rick Hinshaw, a spokesman for the Nassau district attorney.

If the recipients do not comply with the subpoenas, Mr. Zimmer said, they could be called to appear before the grand jury in Pennsylvania.

"One way or another, we are going to get all the information we need to make the right decisions regarding charges in this matter," he said, adding that defendants could face felony charges of aggravated assault, false imprisonment and involuntary deviant sexual intercourse.

Investigators from Pennsylvania have also returned to Long Island, Mr. Zimmer said. Investigators traveled to Bellmore to conduct interviews after the accusations of abuse were reported on Sept. 6, but coaches and school administrators were reluctant to talk, Mr. Zimmer said.

"This is not an easy investigation," he said.

Parents of Mepham football players, already angry at the school district for calling off the football season, said yesterday that the possibility that the school had not been cooperating with the investigation had twisted the knife.

"I'm appalled that people wouldn't talk," said one football player's father, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "I think people know and they're not saying."

Another football parent, Anthony Cosenza, said he hoped the furor would soon begin to die down. In the weeks since the accusations emerged, Mepham High School has been besieged by reporters, rumors and gossip about the case.

Mepham students and parents said the school has become a crude punch line.

"My daughter is on the track team, and she's being harassed by other schools," Mr. Cosenza said. "The soccer team is having golf balls thrown at them. It's frustrating. I wish it would end for them. I wish that these children who are innocent don't have to suffer."

November 6, 2003 Thursday

Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section B; Column 5; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 6

LENGTH: 568 words

HEADLINE: School Board Votes to Dismiss 5 Mepham Football Coaches

BYLINE: By PATRICK HEALY

DATELINE: NORTH MERRICK, N.Y., Nov. 5

BODY:

Five football coaches at the center of the Mepham High School sexual abuse scandal will not be allowed to coach the team next year, the Bellmore-Merrick school board said on Wednesday night in a unanimous decision.

The board's vote was met with applause from parents, students and community members who crowded into an auditorium here for the board's November meeting. In recent weeks, many parents have called on the coaches to step down, following reports that three junior varsity football players were sexually abused at a preseason training camp in Pennsylvania.

Two of the coaches, Kevin McElroy and Art Canestro, who teach at Mepham, had said they would not resign their coaching positions. Both said that they followed all district rules while chaperoning the 60 players at Camp Wayne in Preston Park, Pa. in August.

Mr. McElroy and Mr. Canestro attended the meeting on Wednesday, sitting at the front of a crowded auditorium as the board laid out its plans to recover from the sex abuse scandal and to prevent similar attacks from occurring.

Mr. McElroy said that district officials had earlier indicated that he had done nothing wrong.

"This decision has taken a stake and driven it right through the heart of this community again," he said after walking out of the meeting. "It is beyond my belief that they can make a decision like this without due process."

But to some parents at the meeting, the board did not go far enough.

"The accountability has got to go a little higher," said Charles Kollar, one of the parents. "They're trying to cut their heads off at the lowest level."

Robert Kelly, a lawyer who represents two of the boys who reported being abused, also said the board did not go far enough. Mr. Kelly has called for Mr. Canestro and Mr. McElroy to be fired from their teaching positions, and has also demanded the resignation of the Mepham principal, John F. Didden. The board already had canceled the team's football season.

"The coaches were responsible for the kids and they failed in that regard," Mr. Kelly said on Wednesday night in a telephone interview. "Ultimately they're responsible for the kids on the trip, and sitting in their bunks while the kids are assaulted is not responsible."

The board also said there would be no more sports camps such as the five-day outing where prosecutors say the abuse took place. Prosecutors say that three older players sodomized their younger teammates with pine cones, golf balls and a broomstick on several occasions.

According to the board, the school district will review its field trip guidelines and hold mandatory meetings between players and coaches to stress the district's absence of tolerance for hazing.

Many Mepham High School teachers and staff also attended the meeting to show support for the coaches.

"Something like this could have happened under the supervision of any teacher, any club adviser, any supervisor, any coach, any administrator in any school in any community in any state across our country," said Nicole Hollings, a biology teacher.

Mr. McElroy and his lawyer, Joseph Rosenthal, had said that the coaches slept in separate bunks from the players and never heard any unusual noises from the players' bunks.

Mr. Canestro said in an interview that he spoke several times with one of the boys who reported the abuse at the camp. At no time, said Mr. Canestro, did he notice any sign that something was not right.

March 25, 2004 Thursday

Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section B; Column 6; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 5

LENGTH: 565 words

HEADLINE: 2 L.I. Coaches In Hazing Case Are Removed From Teaching

BYLINE: By PATRICK HEALY

DATELINE: GARDEN CITY, N.Y., March 24

BODY:

Two high-school football coaches from Long Island who chaperoned a team trip that became a nightmare of hazing and sexual abuse were removed from their teaching positions on Wednesday, officials for the Bellmore-Merrick school district said.

Coaches Kevin McElroy, a social studies teacher, and Art Canestro, a physical education teacher, will continue to work for the district, but in administrative jobs where they will have minimal contact with students, the school district's superintendent, Thomas Caramore, said in a statement.

The move came two weeks after a Pennsylvania grand jury excoriated five Mepham High School coaches who supervised the football teams at a preseason training camp in Preston Park, Pa., where the abuse occurred. The report said the coaches were "'more concerned with being coaches of a football team than interested in the well-being of the players as students.'"

Throughout the weeklong camp, three varsity players sodomized three junior varsity teammates, using golf balls, a pine cone and broomsticks coated with mineral ice. The attacks took place day and night, and the coaches have said they did not notice anything amiss until the team returned to Long Island and word of the assaults began to spread.

After the attacks, the school district canceled Mepham's football season and the coaching positions of the five men. Until Wednesday afternoon, however, the abuse scandal and its aftershocks had not affected personnel decisions in the classroom.

Tom Liotti, a lawyer for Mr. McElroy and Mr. Canestro, said that the coaches felt they were treated unfairly, and that they "'intend to fight everything at this point.'"

The grand jury's report found that the coaches were not criminally negligent because they had had no idea that the attacks were occurring. But the report condemned what it called a tradition of hazing on the team and at Mepham High School, and said the school had not sent enough chaperones to supervise the players at camp.

Mr. Caramore said the grand jury's report, as well as information "'gathered from other sources,'" had prompted him to pull the coaches from class.

The other three coaches do not teach for the school district, but Mr. McElroy and Mr. Canestro are tenured teachers protected by contracts and the teachers' union.

In his statement, Mr. Caramore said the decision to remove the coaches from the classroom did not violate their rights.

"'They will perform duties and responsibilities which are consistent with their tenure and contract rights but do not involve the supervision of students,'" Mr. Caramore wrote. "'I believe the steps that I have taken will serve the best interest of the students of Mepham High School.'"

Michael Rubin, a lawyer for two of the victims of the sexual assaults, has criticized and sued school officials for their actions relating to the assaults, but he praised this decision. Mr. Rubin said that one of the victims who had tried to rekindle his old life at Mepham, was reminded of the assaults every time he saw Mr. Canestro or Mr. McElroy in the hallway.

'We're happy to see they realize the coaches shouldn't be around students,' Mr. Rubin said.

The three older players, who have all admitted their roles in the attacks and been sentenced in juvenile court, also went back to Mepham after the attacks until they were suspended in the late autumn.

March 31, 2004 Wednesday

Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section B; Column 6; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 5

LENGTH: 644 words

HEADLINE: 4 L.I. Coaches In Abuse Case Are Seeking Reinstatement

BYLINE: By PATRICK HEALY

DATELINE: GARDEN CITY, N.Y., March 30

BODY:

Four high-school football coaches from Long Island who lost their jobs after players on their team repeatedly sexually abused younger teammates during football camp last summer asked on Tuesday afternoon that they be reinstated as coaches, with an apology and back pay.

'We did our jobs,' said Kevin McElroy, the former head coach.

Speaking at a news conference here, the former Mepham High School coaches disputed several findings of a grand jury that had been charged with investigating the attacks, which occurred in August during a weeklong football camp in Preston Park, Pa. There, three varsity players sodomized three younger players with pine cones, a golf ball and broomsticks, prosecutors said.

The grand jury, which sat in Pennsylvania, found that the five coaches were not aware of the attacks and were not criminally negligent.

But a report from the grand jury said that the coaches had failed to supervise the players and were 'more concerned with being coaches of a football team than interested in the well-being of the players as students.' The grand jury also said that traditions of hazing permeated the team and the school, and had helped lead to the sexual attacks.

Last fall, the school district canceled the football season and removed the five men from their coaching jobs. Last week, it removed two of them -- Mr. McElroy and Art Canestro -- from their teaching positions and reassigned them to administrative duties in which they have little contact with students.

On Tuesday, Mr. McElroy, Mr. Canestro and two of the former coaches, Stephen Vernet and Irwin Wolosky, said they had followed the policies of the Bellmore-Merrick school district while at the camp.

The coaches said they had continually circulated through the camp to check on the 60 varsity and junior-varsity players, and performed several bed checks each night. The grand jury report said that players were left unsupervised for two and a half hours at a time, but the coaches said on Tuesday that the players had only 30- to 40-minute blocks of 'down time,' during which the coaches talked to players and checked bunks.

Mr. Canestro said the coaches could have prevented the assaults only if they had slept in the same cabins with the players, which is prohibited under district policy.

Thomas Caramore, the district superintendent, did not return a phone call Tuesday afternoon, but the district released a statement criticizing the coaches for holding a news conference. 'The coaches' conduct demonstrates that they are more concerned with avoiding responsibility for the consequences of their actions and omissions than in securing justice for the victims and bringing the truth to light.'

The district did not specify the coaches' 'actions and omissions,' or what truth it sought to have revealed.

The coaches apologized again on Tuesday to the three victims and their families, who have sued them and the school district for not having prevented the attacks. Mr. Canestro said he often stays up at night thinking about the attacks, and that 'we feel horrible about what happened.'

'We are very good at reading kids, and there was no sign that anything was out of the ordinary,' he said.

Mr. McElroy, a social studies teacher, and Mr. Canestro, a physical education teacher, said the district was wrong to pull them from their teaching jobs after the grand jury found that they had committed no crimes. The district said the decision was made 'in the best interest of the students at Mepham High School,' but the coaches said it only added another layer of stigma to their lives.

Thomas Liotti, a lawyer for the coaches, has said he believes that removing Mr. McElroy and Mr. Canestro from the classroom was the first step in trying to fire them.

Some parents have called on the coaches to leave the district, but Mr. McElroy said he would not budge.

Appendix 2

Web Page Document

Ex-Mepham H.S. coach answers questions in civil case filed by hazing victims



(03/03/05) **UNIONDALE** - A former football coach at Mepham High School answered questions Thursday in the civil case filed by the victims of a hazing scandal.

Attorneys for the victims say coach Kevin McElroy and other school officials did not do enough to prevent the sexual abuse from happening two summers ago at a football camp in Pennsylvania. One attorney says McElroy knew the hazing existed and failed to take the necessary steps to prevent the sexual abuse from taking place.

McElroy was cleared of criminal charges by a Pennsylvania grand jury. McElroy says he didn't know what was going on at the camp at the time. He answered questions in the civil case about the events leading up to the abuse.

The civil suit against McElroy and the Bellmore-Merrick School District is seeking monetary damages from the district. So far, the school superintendent and the Mepham principal have given their sworn deposition in the case.

Related Story:

[Civil case begins in Mepham High School hazing scandal](#)

Video : <http://ondemand1.cv.net/news12/ELIMPCHT.aspx>

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Appendix 3

Interviews

INTERVIEW WITH FORMER MEPHAM FOOTBALL CAPTAIN

Q. When you were at Mepham, did your team go away to camp?

A. We didn't go to any college. We had a two week college at Mepham. We had two practices a day. We were there all day; same thing, just not sleeping.

Q. Would you have done something differently prior to the camp?

A. Something happened. In that situation if I were coaching... obviously I would have dealt with them. I would have dealt with them; I would have scared them a little bit. I wouldn't have turned it into anything. If they were scared a little bit they wouldn't do it.

Q. Did any situation similar to this occur?

A. There was some like...it wouldn't get to that level, you know. People would be busting some chips. It would be mostly the guys you know. Kids like me when I was a freshman, my brother was a junior, second year, on varsity, Big time player. They would bust my chops a bit. Mess with me a little bit. But I liked it. I know but I enjoyed it. Guys like that they were friendly. They knew all of the kids. You know what I mean. All because they were friendly. They wouldn't physically hurt, you know, like touch your head, like you know, just try to scare you.

Q. What about the student that came forth?

A. That kid – let me tell you. He was the wise ass. Always, always had to have the last word. Talked back to everyone, thought he knows everything. I know for a fact there were issues with that kid. When I was in junior high school, I use to watch my brother play football, the coaches made that kid run around the track. That kid was a big problem.

Q. How would you characterize the community's response when these allegations became public?

A. It's a little mixed. I understood what happened, but those kids never had anything done to them. It's embarrassing to be put in a position where they go out and do a thing like that. They thought they had the authority to do a thing like that. All of a sudden, it could happen to any community. It just so happened here. It could have happened in the next door community. But it didn't. That's too bad. Oh yeah, you see, I get my chops busted at my job. All news is breaking in. My friend, he was captain of the football team with me and when the news broke, they told me you had this happen to you. Everyone in my office busted on me telling me you had this done to you. But it never happened when we were there. If that had happened, something would have definitely been done like if anyone would have brought it up, we would have definitely been running or something.

Q. If you were a parent, how would you feel?

A. Obviously, I would have been upset. Then you had some parents in the community, they were ridiculous. Anything happens and they're going crazy, picketing, you know, I know where they're coming from but they draw more

attention to the community. It draws attention to Mephram in a negative way across the country. We made it on 48 hours, telling them how terrible our school is. When I go around for an interview and I show them my résumé, they say you're from Mephram aren't you from that school that did this and I say that I was captain on that team 3 years before it happened. They say to themselves, "Should I hire this kid?" He was captain.

One year of high school is 25% of your career. That's your chance of going to college.

Q. What are you referring to when you say leaders?

A. Leadership...the possibility of 1 individual on the team, two individuals whoever it is, coming forward and saying, "No this is wrong!" "No, this doesn't happen; this is how it's going to be." I put a lot of blame on the leadership of the team. The coaches put a lot of trust on you, the captain. You're the guy when I'm not here that has to run this team as one unit as a family. If anything happens and we've put the trust in you to guide this team in the right direction we lose our trust in you. We have no faith in you. We have faith in you that you'll do the right thing. We're putting our faith in you. You lead by example, by you allowing something like this to happen you totally lose all credibility with us as well. You know what I'm saying. We had leaders on our team. If something like this would have happened, one person like that wouldn't have sat there, been afraid to speak up. He would have said, "Guys, this is wrong, stop doing this?"

Q. Is that how you think the coaches felt?

A. Of course it is how the coaches felt. I know them very well and I know for a fact if he had any idea of what so ever was going on there would have been some very serious, serious penalties. He would do whatever he needs to do to make sure he runs a pretty tight ship.

You know there were rumors of some kids fooling around when I was a freshman, so what did he have them do; he had them build an office in the locker room. He supervised us 100% of the time. He wasn't having any of that. I know because that's the way he was with us. The district by-laws say coaches are supposed to be sleeping in the bunks. In the morning they walked around from bunk to bunk. But you have to have some authority in place, some leadership making sure something like this doesn't happen. If he had that he got let down in a big way.

Canestro was a great guy. In my junior year he subbed when my teacher was sick. He was great. Everyone respected him. In the summer, he did a camp on Newbridge. I worked there as a counselor. He did a phenomenal job. All the kids loved him. He was an ex-professional baseball player. Kids would sit around him on the floor. He would tell them stories. He was a great guy Canestro. He was a good guy. He had no idea what was going on. If he ever saw anything, he would have stepped up.

Q. Where do you think responsibility lies?

A. Where do I think responsibility lies? Obviously the coaches, probably, the whole thing is a mess. A lot of people are at fault. It's unfortunate that it escalated to the point where it got to. The authorities had to be brought in. It

was put into Newsday 10 out of 15 days. It was top stories. You couldn't let the kid stay out of school until you proved something. You had to have proof. Once the proof came out, everybody kept saying it was true. It was just a mess.

Q. How did the Board react?

A. Rowdy, some of them. Cameras were everywhere. Clicking pictures, interviewing. I got quoted in the paper one day. It was just a bunch of b.s. The board already knows what they wanted to do. They just had these little meetings where they let everyone come up and speak. Whatever they said meant nothing. All it was was an excuse that they allowed the community to speak and nothing. Their minds were made up well before those meetings started. They were yelling at the coaches saying you're not moral; you're not role models, blaming the coaches. At the end of the day, you were in the same situation.

Interview With Former Mephram Assistant Principal

Q. Would you have done something differently prior to the camp?

A. We really don't know what the kids' background is. So we don't know if the school missed something or not.

Q. How would you characterize the community's response when these allegations became public?

A. You know it's very difficult to speak for a community. I don't live in the Bellmore-Merrick area. Having taught and started my administrative career there, people are very caring about their schools, about their kids. I could only react if this happened in the area where I live and of course I would be outraged. It's hard not to be outraged. This was incredibly horrible and disgusting what these kids did. The whole thing was awful. As a level headed person and if I were a community member I'd like to learn all the facts, understand what happened. I wouldn't have had a kid old enough to be in the high school when this thing happened. So the community did what it had to do to listen to the allegations, see the administrations response to it. I don't know what the community knew or if they had any inside information or not.

Q. Was the principal correct in his judgment in permitting the questionable student to attend?

A. That's a tough call. I don't know the answer to that. It's very easy to say he was absolutely wrong. That kid should have never been allowed to go on the trip knowing what happened. But, we don't know. We have no way of

knowing. We don't know what's in the kids' disciplinary folder. We have no idea essentially. We're just going by reports. The only thing we know is that he brought kids together; he met with parents. He tried to mediate. That part I would have done. Would I have, again, not knowing what's in the folder? I don't know whether I wouldn't have let the kid go.

Q. Where does responsibility lie?

A. It lies probably with a whole host of different groups. There's no question that certainly you have to look at the kids that got involved in these things. That are probably 16 or 17 decisions that kids make all day long on the high school level. Good kids make bad decisions. Incredible behavior. So a certain amount of the responsibility lies with the kids. Certainly with the people that are supervising them. They are supervising kids. I don't know what it is that they were doing. I don't know the specifics of supervision. It happened on somebody's watch. And someone did not see what was happening. Didn't have any indication from kids that these things were going on and I would think that they should have had more indication. Probably, the idea that's more damaging to me is that kids didn't even come forward to talk to the coaches, that speaks more probably to the relationship they had with kids that not a kid trusts an adult, a coach, a supervisor enough to say, listen, I just wanted to let you know what the heck is going on here. The responsibility always lies there. It always lies with the high school principal fortunately or unfortunately. It's like the Monday morning quarterback. You get too much credit when things go well and too much negative press when things go bad.

Not knowing what he did in this particular case, you have to say that the school certainly takes some responsibility in this thing. It's probably a little piece pointing to everyone. And then afterwards how it was handled. That wasn't handled right. At first the Superintendent said he was supporting the coaches. Then the next thing you know they're not supporting the coaches. What he knew or didn't know at first so everyone has a little piece of blame.

Q. Do you agree with the board of education's decision?

A. You have to applaud their decision for re-looking at how they handle trips and what they do. Of course it is a reactionary position. You'd like to think that people are proactive in it. They reacted to the situation by changing trips and having all sorts of character education programs in Bellmore-Merrick. All that's good. That's stuff they had to do. You have to respond that way. They cancelled the football season and to me they had to react that way. It was such an outrageous thing. It was a criminal activity on the team that no kid came forward. There was not much choice. People have moved on from a football season. They've done a lot of different things to open up communications between kids and parents. So in terms of those decisions- taking these teachers out of the classroom- I don't know what type of teachers they were. I don't know what their records were. I don't know what they really knew on the trip and what their responsibility was. Obviously, the district investigated enough to think that they should be removed from the classroom. So I don't... that's really the superintendent's decision who presents that to the board. I'm sure he had a good reason. I'm sure he did a thorough investigation as to what

occurred. After the incident, the coaches went back to the building and taught. So something must have happened for them to be removed.

Q. If you were a parent how would you feel?

A. Horrified! If I were a parent in the community, I would have to be horrified- I mean how would you feel if your kids go to the school. Mepham is a very, very fine school. In many ways it is still a fine school. Statistically, it has been a very good school. It has a tradition. There are very few schools that have a tradition like Mepham High School. It has the tradition of being one of the three schools- Southside, Valley Stream and Mepham, where all the kids went to high school. The first graduating class was 1937- it was built during the WPA. It was built during that era where academics and athletics excelled. It has an outstanding tradition. But as a parent- God forbid of one of the victims- you have to be mortified. I don't know what its like to feel as a parent of a victim or a perpetrator. It's horrendous. I'm a little different in my case, because I'm also an educator. Football for me is totally (a) secondary and (b) the end of the season wouldn't phase me in the least. I would like to think if my son were on the team, that I would have brought him up in a way that he could have somehow communicated this. That somehow he told the coaches and then I and he would have been part of the solution, rather than the problem.

Q. If you were a coach how would you feel?

A. If I was one of the coaches at Mepham, how would I feel? - Mortified, incredible remorse, responsible, guilty, heart broken. I would not have reacted

the way they did. I do not think I would have probably told what I saw. But then again, based on what you hear, I would've certainly taken some responsibility for this happening on my watch. In general, as a coach, you feel how could this happen. This wouldn't have happened if I were coaching. It's hard to say because you don't know all the circumstances.

Q. If you were a student how would you feel?

A. Student? We've been having workshops for kids in Nassau County run by the Public High School Athletic Association, all over the place on character ed. Kids are stunned by this. Probably some of a little hazing and teasing happened- carrying water bottles. I think kids were really stunned by this. They felt now when they hear the word Mepham, that it's a terrible place. That these things are happening with all of the teams. The kids at Mepham feel cheated because they do belong to a good school. It doesn't matter what happens now- when they hear the word Mepham. The athletes that were not part of this team have gone to other teams and kids have said things. Some of our kids went to workshops with Mepham kids and when the discussion came up they felt embarrassed for the Mepham kids.

Q. What are your thoughts on the cancellation of the football season?

A. Cancellation of season: Not knowing the details, what choice did they really have? When they did their investigation they found out that it involved more than three kids. They probably found out it was four, then five, then fifteen kids who knew about it. So where do you start to discipline kids. It's tough. Where do you end this? They were begged. They didn't come forward. There

must have been so many meetings. No one would say anything. I could understand the fear and their apprehension about talking. But nevertheless, the season and playing football is not as important as the ultimate outcome which is to find out who is responsible. And telling the truth. How to help kids make sure that this will never happen again. So if the result is to make sure this terrible thing doesn't happen again at Mepham, one 8 game season being cancelled is not a problem. Unfortunately, if you're a senior it hurts more, but that's the way it goes. How do you justify the fact that those kids even though they didn't take part, they knew about and didn't speak about it.

Q. What do you believe to be the public perception of the Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District, subsequent to this incident?

- A. Bellmore-Merrick on the south shore is one of the finest school districts without a doubt. It always has been. In the 1980's and forward, it has been a great district. Bellmore Kennedy is among the best schools on Long Island. Unfortunately, it gets lumped together with Bellmore Mepham. They think of this Mepham incident when you say Bellmore-Merrick. But when you say Kennedy, they say it is a great school. Certainly this district has taken a huge hit when you're on 60 Minutes, 48 Hours and every station across the nation and every reporter on the globe. You certainly have an issue. There was protesting, a million commentaries in the paper, all the editorials, sports papers, sports news columns editorials; it was all over. It was a big jolt economically. People may not buy houses in the community because it was in

the paper. I don't know. I just know what a great school district it was when I was there. Statistically kids do very well.

Q. How do you feel this has affected the fabric of the community from a social and economic point of view?

A. I don't know the future for Bellmore-Merrick. The issue was not what it was- it happened a year and a half ago. On Long Island the issue of Roslyn has taken the weight off. Finances are the issue now. All districts now are living with the ramifications with what happened. They changed their own policies, looked at what kids can do when they go away. Who they sleep with. Going to camps. And all those issues have been looked at. It didn't happen to all these districts but in a sordid way looked at all their plans. Now that's what we do. Unfortunately, we react to situations. Hopefully, situations that don't happen to you.

Q. How do you foresee the future?

A. Bellmore-Merrick has changed a lot of things, a lot of policies and hopefully for the community they can move forward and be a very strong district.

Interview With Present Bellmore Community Member

Q. Would you have done something differently prior to the camp?

A. He wants to have a star on the football team for God's sakes. Come on.

Everyone wants to live in a fantasy world. Football is a contact sport; it is violent. The coaches promote violence in some kind of way. Now you can't attack football. Football is together with baseball. They are two American sacred cows. God forbid you attack them. But, the kid was a star. He should have been thrown out of school and suspended. If this was your kid, he threatened them at the water fountain. He should have been out of school.

Q. How would you categorize the community's response when these allegations became public?

A. Typical. The community clammed up. The community did not want to provide information. It was swept under the carpet. It was hush-hush. I read the newspaper articles. The community didn't want to talk to reporters, that's natural. Then they started to spin it. It's a mystery how the kid continued to be in school. After camp, the principal allowed the kid to be in school. Just for that I would have fired the principal. This whole thing came to a head with the prosecution in Pennsylvania. Otherwise hush, hush. It would have been swept under the carpet. The D.A. in Pennsylvania didn't leave it alone. They would have been delighted for it to go away. The Athletic Director said, "make it go away; make it go away."

Q. Was the principal correct in his judgment in permitting the questionable student to attend?

A. I would have suspended him. Out! If this is your kid, he threatened him at the water fountain. He said to the kid before this whole thing started, you won't sleep a wink at camp. No, the student had prior allegations against him. The Principal should have cancelled the camp.

Q. Where does the responsibility lie?

A. The Principal, the principal, He can't hide behind anyone. This is an egregious case because the writing was on the wall. There was this incident before the trip. A principal with balls would have cancelled this whole trip. Nobody goes. Think about it. The coaches would not have slept at night either when you're with kids not yet 13 years old. Let the coaches stay home. They don't make the extra money. He became wild at camp. A week before camp this kid goes berserk and threatens a kid and tells him at the water fountain that he's not going to sleep a wink at camp. It's so obvious. What are we, children? It was probably a big kid that, I don't know what his position was. I'm not saying the coaches knew that this kid was capable of what he did. You let them get away with it, but they knew that things can deteriorate. Gaging and putting other kids' heads in the toilet bowl, what do you expect? They're very creative in what they can do and I'm not accusing the coaches of complicity but they should have responded to these threats seriously.

Q. Do you agree with the Board of Education's decision?

A. Yes, but not enough. They should have done more. Fired the principal. They should have cancelled more seasons. The coaches together with the principal need to take full responsibility.

Q. If you were a parent, how would you feel?

A. As a parent I feel very agitated and very disappointed. I wouldn't want my kid to play on any football team that behaves like that.

Q. If you were the coach, how would you feel?

A. The coaches should be ashamed of themselves. They should have safeguarded the students.

Q. If you were the student, how would you feel?

A. It was terrible.

Q. What are your thoughts on the cancellation of the football season?

A. Football is a sacred cow. They did the right thing by canceling it. They didn't do enough to teach the kids a lesson.

Q. What do believe to be the public perception of the Bellmore-Merrick Central High School District, subsequent to this incident?

A. We have gotten ourselves on the map when it comes to schools. The Bellmore/Merrick School District was distinguishing itself academically. It was holding its own with the top districts. This incident distinguished us in another way that's not easily forgotten.

Q. How do you feel this has affected the fabric of the community from a social and economic point of view?

A. People are more at odds with each other. It's not business as usual. There's a lot of dissatisfaction and certain members of the community are not going to stand for it. There's more vigilance and critique of the actions of the schools and board.

Q. How do you foresee the future?

A. Now – nobody cares. Only when other things happen in Bellmore then it's connected to the hazing incident. People have forgotten about it and the Principal is still there.