

Module 3: Anti- Hazing Message

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Ladies and Gentlemen of the School Board I would like to thank each of you for your time today. I am hopeful that my message and the information that I present to you today will be integrated onto our school district's web site and that the essence of its message can be incorporated into the relevant training materials, guidelines, and policies that are used by our district's administrators in providing for the continued educational needs of their coaches, parents, and student athletes. It is implied that our district should immediately begin the process to adopt a clear and concise anti-hazing policy that would be applied to all of our current risk management practices. The statements in my presentation here today are derived from research that has been conducted by the professional academic community and can be found in the latest scholarly contributions in sports education. Much of the information and recommendations that I will share with you today is based on this research. The two primary studies that I used in preparing for this presentation are from work performed by University of Maine Professors Elizabeth Allan and Mary Madden in 2008 and an earlier study made by Alfred University researchers Nadine Hoover and Norm Pollard in 2000. These studies have been made available to each board member present here today and it is my personal recommendation that this research also be made available to our coaches, educators, and administrators throughout the district.

As a coach I take my responsibility for the athletic performance and overall development of my student athletes very seriously. I am fully aware of the impact that I have as an educator on their athletic, academic, and social growth and experience. Athletics is an ancient activity deeply embedded in our world's and our country's history. In today's society sports remain a very important part of the lives of tens of millions of our citizens both young and old alike.

Properly administered athletic programs can teach valuable leadership skills including competitiveness, hard work, assertiveness, team work, and sacrifice. These are skills that are in high demand with employers today. Sports require physical training and activity which can contribute to a healthy lifestyle, a subject which is both serious and clear in regards to our country's youth today. Being an accepted and valued member of a team fulfills the cultural need felt by many of us to be accepted. As parents, coaches, and administrators we want to see our students succeed and belonging to a group. Many of our students feel the natural pressure to succeed and to become involved in a part of something. It is not hard to imagine with all of these pressures to be accepted and to succeed that some of our student athletes become desperate to satisfy these deeply innate feelings.

Hazing is an illegal activity that is widely misunderstood. Much of the problem stems from our own ignorance of what hazing actually is. Many of us may have preconceptions about what they believe to be defined as hazing. Before we attempt to clarify the matter by defining what hazing is, the experts and research agree that hazing incidents are occurring right in front of our faces. These activities are occurring as frequently as ever and we as athletic and academic administrators are actually contributing to the problem. This research is also indicating that we as a society do not understand what constitutes hazing. It is very easy to assume that hazing is not a problem in our district or department until the phone rings or there is a knock on your office door with someone describing a very serious issue that requires prompt action and precise answers immediately.

Hazing is a deadly matter. It can cost your student athletes their lives. It can cost administrators and coaches their careers and their reputations. It can ruin the trust within a community that took decades or generations to build. Hazing can ruin the dreams and the

opportunities of potential athletes that are forced to quit an activity because of an emotionally scarring incident. All of these things are happening at an alarming rate. Many of these incidents are ticking time bombs that are being built up right under our noses. Are we prepared to face a hazing incident in our district that may include the death, rape, or poisoning of one of your student athletes? These are not pleasant terms or circumstances to discuss in any format. When the local news runs a story about one of these issues occurring in a hazing incident involving your team or department will you be prepared? If it has already happened then it is probably too late.

Many of us may view hazing as harmless, traditional, or natural to normal team building evolution. The research indicates that many of us may feel that hazing is even a necessary rite of passage for many activities. According to the research, many of the activities that we might be promoting or sanctioning in our athletic departments right now could be considered as hazing under the modern definition of the term. Generally speaking, anything that singles out a group is considered hazing. Specifically, hazing can be considered any activity demanded of someone who is trying to join or participate in a group that harms, humiliates, abuses, or injures them regardless of their willingness to participate. It is essential to understand that even if the person agrees to perform or participate in the activity it is still considered hazing and is illegal.

It might be prudent to ask what types of behaviors are acceptable and what types of behaviors are not acceptable. There is no difference between what one might consider low level hazing like wiping shaving cream on someone's face or making someone sing a silly song in a public setting and more serious and dangerous behaviors like forced alcohol consumption, simulated sexual acts, beatings, or other gross deprivations. The connection between low level hazing and higher, more disturbing and potentially harmful levels of hazing should be clear.

Research indicates that low level behaviors will likely turn into more serious and high risk situations later. Once hazing activities begin or are already entrenched within a group an escalation of those more harmful behaviors is likely to evolve and occur.

Many activities that we might be promoting right now are likely to be considered hazing. It is probably surprising that we as administrators might be actively engaged in and promoting an illegal activity. In many respects hazing has become normalized in our athletic culture today. In many of our pep rallies we might observe questionable behaviors right before our eyes. Using our definition of hazing found above would you consider having junior varsity football players dress up like cheer leaders and perform in front of the student body to be an acceptable activity? How much did we as coaches or other players force the activity upon them? Did these players volunteer to do the performance? What if a coach requires that only the under classmen are to clean the weight lifting equipment after a team work out? What about keeping a school tradition that requires all freshman football players to shave their heads before spring practice begins? These are the types of questions that we should all be asking ourselves as we move forward with the issue. Many of our school traditions can be considered hazing and it will take a cultural and administrative shift in our district to make immediate and permanent corrective actions. It is vital that we as administrators and coaches begin to observe all of our activities and traditions and learn how they may fit into our definition of hazing.

To combat this very serious issue it is important that we begin to formulate a written and concise hazing policy that we can integrate into our existing risk management practices. Due to the seriousness of the problem as indicated by the research it is my personal recommendation that a zero tolerance policy towards hazing be implemented. We should review all of our of our school's athletic activities with scrutiny. At each level of the administration we should put forth

a united front to our student athletes, parents, teachers, coaches, and law makers. If any school activity can be remotely viewed as hazing then it should be stopped. Our entire staff needs to understand what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. Primarily, any activity can be viewed as possible hazing that does not directly relate to athletic participation, playing, or practice. Educating ourselves and our new staff members is the key to preventing hazing under our watch. All of our coaches need to be trained to recognize what possible hazing practices to look for. They need to be extra vigilant in supervising locker room activities but knowing what to look for and listen for in their athletes should be an important activity for them at all times. Name calling and all forms of verbal abuse should be banned forms of behavior. Noticing things like shaved heads, piercings, and tattoos in certain groups should be investigated and covered in team rules and guidelines. All forms of harassment, deprivations, and assault should also be covered and if witnessed should be thoroughly investigated. Alcohol abuse in all forms should be forbidden. Coaches should understand how to properly report suspicious activities and who to report them to.

Many of our anti-hazing initiatives will require our district to make expanding financial commitments. Our budgets will need to be planned to include these critical initiatives. These initiatives might include, but should not be limited to promoting and providing alternative team building activities like team barbeques, award ceremonies, or skills competitions. A financial commitment should be made to provide special motivational speakers to our teams. Victims of hazing can be invited to speak at pre-season activities or coaches seminars. A new and comprehensive system could be implemented that will attempt to interview seniors that are leaving the program, former players, and players who were cut from teams during tryouts in an attempt to better identify and understand the extent of hazing activities on our program.

Training, education, and regular discussions about hazing are essential steps in its prevention. Our student athletes cannot fully understand what constitutes hazing if we as administrators and coaches are confused about the matter. Our district cannot ignore this issue. Having a current and up to date hazing policy is critical in managing and avoiding the risks involved. Taking a tough zero tolerance stances will likely save lives and careers. Everyone from the student athlete, the parents, the coaches, and the entire administrative structure must be included in these efforts in order to change how hazing is perceived and understood. Open communication with all parties concerned is essential to our success. A financial commitment to all of these issues is implied and unavoidable. Ignoring the potential risks is far too dangerous.

The parents need to be communicating with both their student athletes and with their school about hazing. Our efforts should include providing these parents with concise and relevant information about the issue. They should have a means to report suspected hazing activities either through campus police or some other proper mechanisms. These reporting methods need to be developed to include student athletes as well. Coaches and administrators need to be trained how to regularly speak with their athletes and with their parents about hazing. Our stance on hazing needs to be clear to everyone we encounter. A written anti-hazing policy should also include clear disciplinary repercussions and procedures as well. Our zero tolerance stances should be communicated to everyone at every point in the process. When the unfortunate occurs then this policy needs to have the means to be enforced promptly and consistently. If hazing is encountered then the offenders should be dealt with fairly but once it is established that hazing activities have occurred then the perpetrators need to be removed from the team and the campus immediately. A clear set of athletic department and individual team rules and guidelines need to be in place and understood by everyone. A clear locker room policy

needs to be included as many hazing activities are happening in our team's locker rooms. Coaches need to understand what hazing is and they need to be supervising all team activities in the locker rooms. These rules and guidelines need to be regularly reviewed and covered with coaches, parents and athletes. These rules should clearly state what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. Team captains should be included in this discussion and their role in preventing and discouraging hazing activities should be made clear to them. Our team rules should completely discourage all hazing activities and should make clear that if players engage in these types of activities or a coach observes these activities and does not report them then they are committing an illegal act and are no longer welcome in our program

While the current research suggests that hazing is indeed prevalent in athletics it is also an activity that is occurring in other organizations on our campuses as well. Intermural teams, academic organizations, club sports, fraternities, and sororities all face the same potential hazing problems. Our district's athletic departments need not and cannot face this problem alone. Encouraging campus wide anti-hazing initiatives is paramount in changing the overall cultural perception of hazing. Cultivating the support and involvement of the entire campus and district communities is more likely to be an effective strategy to combating hazing. Many academic institutions are encouraging all students and faculty to sign an anti-hazing pledge. The signatures can be made electronically and posted to an official school or district web site. It might be prudent to have new parents and students sign similar written pledges as a part of their regular registration paperwork. If we overlook hazing in one corner of our campuses then it will likely persist in other areas as well. Creating a campus wide committee that can present a wide, deep, and united front against hazing is likely to lend itself to the positive exchange of ideas. This comprehensive use of campus wide resources will be better suited to use the latest in social

media and web site administration. The committee can manage and create newsletters and other educational materials to fight the problem. Our districts anti-hazing message will reach more of our campus community if our entire campus community is involved in initiating this necessary shift in our perception of hazing activities.