



Dr. Nikolai P. Vitti
Superintendent of Schools

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August 28, 2020

Executive Director Uly,

The intent of this letter is to request that you and the Michigan High School Sports Association (MHSAA) Representative Council reconsider your position to allow over 35,000 student-athletes in over 600 schools throughout Michigan, and specifically over 1,100 student-athletes within our school district, to play football this fall. I write this letter on behalf of our district's football coaches but also on behalf of countless players, coaches, and families who have reached out to me within Detroit and throughout the state about their frustration with the MHSAA's decision.

James Alexander, our district's Executive Director of athletics and Member of the Representative Council, and I were shocked when you and the MHSAA made the decision to shift the football season to the spring. This announcement was made after you made strong public statements only a few days before stating the consensus was that players, families, and schools wanted to play throughout the state; teams, including coaches and players, were applying the right COVID safety standards; and that high school football was not comparable to college football considering the Big Ten's decision to move the season to the spring.

After the surprising reversal to shift the season to the spring, vague reasons were provided, including rising concerns from Athletic Directors across the state with playing, limited audiences for games, and the lack of clear support from the Governor and the state health department. Factually, nothing changed from a player's health perspective or risk analysis from strongly stating football would be played to it being postponed. This has led everyone, including myself, to believe politics were played and that the MHSAA abdicated its responsibility to make athletic decisions and instead deferred to the Governor in closed door conversations instead of supporting student-athletes, coaches, and their families.

There is reason to believe that the Governor would rather have football, and perhaps other fall sports, played in the spring. This was clear from the Return to Learn guidance issued to school districts and public statements made on the issue in the spring. However, the Governor never publicly stated that she would prevent any sports from being played if the MHSAA moved in another direction. From the beginning, the Governor stated that the playing of sports was the decision of the MHSAA. Even now, as the MHSAA continues to put pressure on her to allow swimming, volleyball, and soccer to be played in certain areas of the state, it was the MHSAA that placed that burden on her through your guidelines that connected Michigan's Safe Start phases with sports. Why are you blaming or asking the Governor to make decisions that she has given to the MHSAA to make?

There is a sense that the Governor has signaled through her staff that she would issue an Executive Order (EO) preventing certain sports from being played or invoke EO 2020-160 to prevent sports from being played that do not separate athletes by six feet. I believe this is true; however, she has not publicly said this or stated that decision at this point. To resolve this matter, the MHSAA should require the Governor to issue those EOs or use EO 2020-160 by a defined deadline and let her own that decision. If she does not then I would suggest moving on with playing fall sports, across the state, including football. You are asking the Governor to move regions to Phase 5 simply because of sports. This does not make sense and is unfair to the Governor. The decision to move a region to the next Phase, or back, goes beyond sports.

Students Rise. We all Rise

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Upon our legal review of this issue, the MHSAA has had full discretion and authority to determine which sports would be played and when. EO 2020-142, "Provision of preK-12 education for the 2020-21 school year" and "MI Safe Schools: Michigan's 2020-21 Return to School Roadmap," both dated June 30, 2020, regulate high school athletics during Phase 4 of the Michigan Safe Start Plan. EO 2020-142 provides that school districts must "incorporate the Return to School Roadmap's required protocols governing . . . athletics." Section 2(b)(3). The Roadmap provides, in pertinent part, that school districts must "comply with all guidance published by Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) and the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS)."

Both EO 2020-142 and the Roadmap delegate authority to the MHSAA to determine what sports will be played in Phase 4. Put another way, absent an EO dedicated to sports that delineates what sports can or cannot be played in Phase 4 – the MHSAA has the final say. In addition, invoking EO 2020-160 to prevent football from being played is nonsensical. If the need to separate athletes by six feet is the standard, then sports should not move forward anywhere in the state. Obviously, the Governor would have applied this EO considering even cross country and golf involve athletes being within six feet from each other. With students returning to schools this past week it is obvious that, at times, students are within six feet of each other.

We now know that Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky have all decided to play football this fall. Each of these states have similar or higher COVID infection rates than Michigan. These states are led by both Democrat and Republican governors who allowed their athletic associations to make the decision to have fall sports played. Most of these states have implemented progressive COVID prevention strategies as our Governor has done to rightfully protect their citizens. Many student-athletes continue to ask why they can attend school daily but not play football. It is illogical to them, especially when the MHSAA allowed them to start practice and prepare for the season in the first place. More importantly, they see and know that their counterparts are playing in nearby states while they are sitting at home.

As you know, football is more than a sport. It is most often a life changing experience that develops community, leadership, purpose, and meaning. For many of our student-athletes, it is the reason to wake up in the morning and go to school, maintain better grades, and stay out of trouble. Depression is setting in for too many of our athletes. They are suffering from the loss of structured activities. If high school football players are playing throughout the country, and in the region, so should ours.

It is not too late to restart the season. Pass a resolution to play in the fall and give the Governor two days to issue an EO requiring it to be moved to the spring. After that point, allow teams to begin practicing, with pads, for two-three weeks and then start competition. Shorten the season as you would in the spring and use the same format for the playoffs that you proposed. I struggle to understand what could be different in the spring that would allow the season to be played instead of now.

If the MHSAA does not move forward with playing this fall then please put in writing, to all high school athletic directors and coaches, who can share with their players, why the season was moved to the spring and what conditions must exist to play in the spring. We request the same of the Governor if she prohibits football from being played in the fall.

Students Rise. We all Rise

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Thank you for your service, review, consideration, and action.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "N. Vitti", written over a white background.

Nikolai P. Vitti, Ed.D.
Superintendent

DPSCD Football Coaches in Support

Andre Harlan
Courtney Dinkins
Damion King
Damon Britt
Deon Godfrey

Harold Harris
Jimmy Macon
John Thompkins
Quan Edgar
Ralph Sewell

Rob Hunt
Thomas Wilcher
Tyrone Spencer

cc: Governor Gretchen Whitmer
MHSAA Representative Executive Board

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