

ANDOVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS



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February 15, 2018

Statement of the Andover School Committee¹

- The School Committee thanks the many residents of Andover who have written to us and expressed their views concerning the current investigation of Andover High School boys' varsity hockey coaches and the letter that Superintendent Berman sent to AHS Principal Conrad and then-Athletic Director Doucette in March of 2016 providing a lengthy critique of Varsity Hockey Coach Kuchar's coaching practices.
- With respect to Dr. Berman's March 2016 letter and events following its public release, the School Committee has carefully considered all the public comments received. The letter and subsequent events have been the subject of extensive discussion by the School Committee in numerous executive sessions in recent days. We are also in receipt of Dr. Berman's statement of February 15, 2018 concerning the current situation and have taken it into account in formulating this statement.
- The question of whether Dr. Berman's letter was appropriate is a difficult one and, in our opinion, there is no clear right or wrong answer. Dr. Berman's letter was based on his observations of the boys' varsity hockey team during the 2015-2016 season when his son was a player for the team. As parents, we all have the right to support our children and to offer criticism, when appropriate, of school staff, be they teachers, coaches or others. We do not lose that right solely because we hold a position of authority within the school system, whether as a School Committee member or Superintendent, as long as we exercise that right on our personal time and using our personal resources, as was the case in this situation. Specifically, with respect to athletics, we recognize the right of parents to voice their concerns but equally recognize the responsibility of the administration to handle those complaints as it deems appropriate. Moreover, both parents and staff are strongly encouraged to adhere to the terms of the Athletic Handbook which sets out a clear process for raising these concerns.

¹ The purpose of this statement is to express the School Committee's views concerning Dr. Berman's March 2016 letter to Phil Conrad and Don Doucette. It does not address the current investigation by the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF) and an independent investigator relating to coaching practices on the hockey team that were brought directly to DCF. This is a separate personnel matter being handled by Principal Conrad.

- While keeping in mind the right of all parents to express their concerns, it is clear that there are numerous perils when a person in a position of authority expresses an opinion regarding personnel, particularly when it is a highly negative one. The School Committee finds it hard to imagine that any of us would have written a similar letter. Whether stated or not, those receiving such a letter clearly know that the sender is a person of authority within the school system and might be unduly influenced by it. However, it is very noteworthy that in this situation, Principal Conrad and then-Athletic Director Doucette treated Dr. Berman's letter as a parent letter, discussed Dr. Berman's concerns with Coach Kuchar, and subsequently re-appointed Coach Kuchar as the AHS varsity hockey coach for each of the past two seasons. Dr. Berman did not overrule that decision or question Principal Conrad or AD Doucette's judgment, even though it would have been within his authority to do so. Dr. Berman has indicated that it is his practice to leave athletic coaching decisions to the athletic director and principal and that he will continue that practice here. Moreover, to dispel any perception of bias, Superintendent Berman has formally recused himself from decisions concerning Coach Kuchar. The School Committee fully supports this recusal.
- We think it was wrong that Dr. Berman referred to a specific player, other than his son, by name in his letter despite having no expectation that his letter would be made public. Dr. Berman apologized in his statement of February 15. We are troubled that Dr. Berman's letter has been made public and believe that all parents have the right to expect that letters such as these will be held in confidence to the greatest extent possible.
- We believe that Dr. Berman should have, at a minimum, notified the Chair of the School Committee of his potential conflict concerning Coach Kuchar prior to her January 24, 2018 press release expressing confidence in Dr. Berman's ability to conduct an impartial review. No member of the School Committee had seen Dr. Berman's letter prior to when it became public around February 1, 2018.
- We also believe that Dr. Berman should not have made a comment to the press about his son's experience on the hockey team that was not accurate. He has apologized for that statement.
- Some have called on the School Committee to take significant disciplinary action against Dr. Berman for his actions in this matter, including some who have called for his dismissal. In our opinion, these events do not warrant such an action, particularly considering his otherwise outstanding leadership of our district. His letter of March 2016 has proven controversial and, at least in retrospect, we believe Dr. Berman's concerns about Coach Kuchar should have been communicated more clearly. At a minimum, as he has acknowledged, the letter should not have referred to him as a Superintendent and should have clearly stated that it was written as a parent and was intended to be treated that way as verbally communicated. However, because his letter was not clearly improper or an abuse of his authority and considering his recusal from future involvement in this matter and apology for certain statements and actions as detailed above, we have concluded that no further action is necessary or appropriate. We hope that everyone in our community can move on from this difficult episode.
- The School Committee has shared the above views with Dr. Berman.