

MANCHESTER ESSEX REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ATHLETIC PROGRAM REVIEW
1/3/2018

Executive Summary

In keeping with their pursuit of an optimal athletic program for their students, the administration has sought the advice of an outside athletic program consultant. There is a desire to identify the strengths of the current program as well as opportunities for improvement. Such a review is critical and the resulting transparency refreshing. A variety and wealth of information has been obtained including a review of documents presented by the school, surveys to stakeholders, individual meetings with school personnel, and group meetings with faculty/staff, coaches, parents, and students. Please refer to the appendix for the actual review process and more details.

The Athletic Program at Manchester Essex is marked by much strength. One of the most notable strengths is the vocal and caring support by many stakeholders who view athletics as a vital component of the overall educational program. As is the case in all exemplary schools, the strengths of this program center on the knowledgeable and committed coaching and teaching staffs that have, for the most part, developed strong, caring bonds with students. It is also important to note that all stakeholders share great admiration and respect for the athletic trainer, Jill Levine. With such quality educators, it is clear that the focus is on learning, and academics come first. Such a disposition is enhanced when you have coaches who are also teachers in the building. This hiring strategy is admirable and strengthens the overall school culture.

Student-athlete participation in the athletic program is solid, with a fair percentage participating in multiple sports. These students further model exceptional sportsmanship and support one another, both within and across teams. It is, therefore, not surprising that Manchester Essex received the 2016/17 Cape Ann League Hyland Award for overall excellence in athletic performance, academics, and sportsmanship.

With approximately 17 different sports, there is something for everyone. Most stakeholders agree that the institution offers ample opportunities for participation. This is a community that understands the value of an active and healthy lifestyle. There is an overarching philosophy that emphasizes participation in team sports and this is supported by a “no cut” policy. However, most of the feedback received questions this policy. It clearly needs to be studied.

One of the strongest recommendations is to evaluate the impact of having a part-time athletic director. This came up as a primary concern with teachers, coaches, parents and students. The second most emphasized need has been that of the budget, user fees and the overall perceived lack of transparency. There has been considerable discussion about the current athletic user fee structure at Manchester

Essex. Many feel there is significant confusion and misunderstanding about the budget and fees, and how to access information about “the whys.” There is a clear need for a consistent and transparent process in these areas.

It is not at all uncommon for a program review of this type to mention improving communications as a central theme; that is certainly true in this review as well. Maintaining a clear line of communication for all parties is essential to the understanding and appreciation of all that is going on in this highly complex and logistically challenging arena. Recommendations are further addressed in this report in areas such as: improved websites, more connections with existing newsletters, offering student and parent feedback forms, holding parent forums, establishing a more collaborative working relationship between the athletic director and assistant to the athletic director, preseason information meetings for students and parents, and more effective communication between coaches and parents. We know the axiom “more is better” is particularly true in this sphere. It should be common knowledge that the real solution to effective communication is a commitment to continuous improvement and the desire to keep all participants on the same page. We also know, however, in an ever-connected world, that because of the relentless need for information, this will be the one challenging area that will consistently need to be addressed and monitored. Trumpeting the accomplishments of the Manchester Essex athletic program, enhancing school spirit, and keeping lines of communications open are vital for all.

Please note that the final recommendations are divided into six specific domains:

1. Position of the Athletic Director
2. Role of the Middle School
3. Communication
4. Budget/Fees
5. Facilities
6. Other

These six domains serve as a useful structural focus for this report. By breaking down these recommendations as described, the hope is to allow the Superintendent, Athletic Director, and administrative leadership the ability to develop an effective “attack” plan that will maintain a program dedicated to excellence.

Implementation Strategy

Upon receiving this report and its accompanying recommendations, Manchester Essex should develop a strategic plan for reviewing and acting upon each accepted recommendation. It may make sense to appoint a standing internal Athletic Implementation Committee, charged with developing a timely, comprehensive implementation strategy. The membership of this Athletic Implementation Committee should be determined by the school, but, at the very least, should include the Athletic Director, Finance/Business Manager, and the Principal. This internal athletic committee’s plan for approving and implementing the recommendations should be communicated clearly and openly to the entire community.

MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ATHLETIC REVIEW

1. The Role of the Athletic Director

The clear majority of stakeholders feel the model of combined Assistant Principal/Athletic Director is not working. Given the demands of both positions, there is a perception that the athletic director duties are shortchanged. Many have expressed concern that the athletic director does not have the credentials and qualifications required for this position. Coaches, students and parents feel that logistics fall through the cracks, and that the full responsibility of running the program truly lies with the assistant to the athletic director. It is problematic that only one person (assistant to the athletic director) understands how to operate the various logistical systems that enable the athletic program to properly function. Given the day-to-day operational demands of this program, healthy communication and a fair division of tasks are critical. Currently, this is not happening. As well, stakeholders believe that the uniforms, supplies and equipment are not properly stored or maintained. Even students have observed that the room where uniforms are kept is chaotic and disorganized. Further, coaches and students have expressed concern with overcrowded buses. Their feeling is that some trips are clearly over capacity, creating safety concerns and overall discomfort. In order to help with event supervision, the athletic director hires faculty to serve as site managers to cover various contests. Some who fill this role have expressed concern with the process. Issues, such as not having keys to certain facilities or the sound system, frequently arise creating confusion. Even the trainer expressed this concern as she is often asked to help solve such issues. In summary, there is a solid perception that the athletic program functions in a reactionary manner versus a proactive or visionary manner.

Recommendations:

- A. *Establish a committee to evaluate the effectiveness of the current position of Assistant Principal/Athletic Director. In the end, it is critical to ascertain a position that best serves the athletic program and the students of Manchester Essex.*
- B. *Immediately develop a more collaborative communication system between the athletic director and assistant to the athletic director.*
 - *Since there is distance between their offices, daily meeting times should be scheduled in order to address concerns, clarify changes, and plan ahead. As well, there should be regular check-ins. Given the challenges of running an athletic program, these two roles should be supportive of each other and do everything possible to create a better product for the students. It may be necessary to involve a trained facilitator to assist with this process.*
 - *The athletic director should be well versed in the operational systems of the athletic program. Currently, the assistant to the athletic director is the only one trained in such systems (i.e., the arbiter).*

- C. *Given that coaches, parents, and students share concerns regarding uniform and equipment care, this area should be addressed. Is this the result of a stretched AD/Assistant Principal? Creating a stipend for an equipment manager is recommended. The storage areas should be studied to see if design improvements could be part of the solution. For example, building better shelving or installing hanging options can often make a huge difference. Caring properly for uniforms, supplies and equipment can result in better overall quality and safety, as well as cost savings.*
- D. *Transportation needs to be carefully determined with safety first and foremost in mind. Buses have capacity limitations. Be sure to stay within those standards and take time to educate students and coaches regarding such decisions. For example, if you send the softball and girls tennis teams together on one bus, they may finish at different times. As well, the venues may not be next to one another. This may result in an inconvenience yet the cost of an extra bus outweighs the inconvenience. Oftentimes, an explanation of “the whys” can shed light on the situation.*
- E. *Evaluating coaches, as with teachers, is an important process. There are many tools to assist with this task, including that recommended by the MIAA Coaching Education committee. As well, there are various software products that streamline the process. One such notable product is Coach Evaluator. This software is designed for schools and athletic organizations. The system is customizable with an evaluation template library hosting an array of forms to choose or reference. Supporting coaches, reinforcing best practices, or making tough decisions are difficult without a formal evaluation process in place. In summary, determining a standard and meaningful process is necessary. See enclosed samples of coaching evaluations.*
- F. *Reinforce the expectations and process for all who serve as Site or Event Managers. As well, issuing a Site Manager Checklist (see enclosed document as an example) is highly recommended. Currently, there is some confusion in this area.*
- G. *Lastly, conducting an annual analysis of the athletic program is a proactive strategy that makes sense. Even if the athletic director is the only person involved in this analysis, examining the program is a must. Answering the following questions can provide insight and ideas for improvement.*
- *Has anything changed in the past year? Examples include financial support, facility maintenance, population shift, or health/safety concerns.*
 - *What adjustments should be considered, given the changes that have occurred? The key here is to assess honestly and plan accordingly.*
 - *How would you like to improve the program? If needed, get feedback*

from coaches, parents, and school administrators.

- *Where can you find help with making improvements? Talking to colleagues, networking at conferences, or researching through professional publications are all viable options. Seldom do you have to re-invent the wheel, as solutions abound.*

H. *How can you revive some energy and enthusiasm for the position of athletic director? Attending state or national conferences can be motivational and provide many opportunities to network. Taking courses and earning credentials such as the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association's CAA (Certified Athletic Administrator), or the National Federation of High School's AIC (Accredited Interscholastic Coach) further enhance credibility. Professional development experiences help to restore focus, effort, and belief in educational athletics.*

2. The Role of the Middle School

Create a task force that evaluates, refines, and reestablishes a clear and transparent Middle School program. The experience for this age group must be developmentally appropriate. It is important to establish rules governing middle school sports that will ensure the widest possible degree of participation. Areas that need consideration:

- * *Physical and psychological readiness*
- * *The cutting of young adolescents from teams*
- * *Emphasis on winning*
- * *Unrealistic expectations from adults*
- * *Emotional and physical safety (issue of middle school students in locker rooms with older students or on teams with older students)*
- * *Scheduling of games and practices*
- * *There is a feeling that middle school students are "used" to fill some high school teams*

Some of these factors may, or may not, be problematic. It is, however, important to highlight them and educate stakeholders and decision-makers.

As it is impossible for a school to be everything to everyone, it makes sense to define the program and communicate it clearly. For example, if the only middle school teams offered in the fall are soccer and field hockey, emphasize that and make it known. A relatively inexpensive way to enhance opportunities for this level would be to implement some intramural offerings. For example, there are times during the year when the gymnasium is free. Offer activities like basketball and games units for middle school students who are not involved in teams.

3. Communication

Make a concerted effort to improve, promote, and regularly assess communication to all stakeholders. There is a notable disconnect between the perception of the athletic

director and the perceptions of stakeholders when it comes to communication. Some of this may simply be the need to educate and provide awareness regarding how and where information is located.

a. Despite being published in the Student Athletic Handbook, most stakeholders have little understanding of the program philosophy. Such an important message should be front and center on the athletic program's home webpage. As well, the philosophy should be analyzed to ensure that it best represents the program. It needs to be a living document. Creating athletic department covenants is a way to bring the philosophy to life. Covenants are guiding principles that include two parts: 1) a binding agreement 2) where action is physically visible. When truly representing a program, covenants say, "This is what we believe, so this is what you will see." For example, if RESPECT is one of your covenants, it might look like this:

- Earn respect by being respectful*
- Making sacrifices for the team*
- Always make eye contact*
- Paying attention in class and practice*
- Being on time*
- Greet officials and visiting teams*
- No profanity*
- No excuses*
- Humble in victory*

This is just one example. Covenants put a face on the philosophy and bring it to life. Establishing a committee to develop program covenants may be helpful to communicating what Manchester Essex athletics truly stands for.

b. It is important to re-examine the "no-cut" policy, as it feels problematic and confusing to many stakeholders. Almost all agree that this policy makes sense for the middle school level. However, the clear consensus for the high school level is to permit coaches to select teams. Students and parents, in particular, talked about overenrolled teams, and situations where seniors join for the first time and lack commitment. The harsh truth is that schools can only house so many students in each level while still providing meaningful instruction and competition. Much like how a math classroom with 30 students would be tough, we can't expect a field hockey coach to effectively teach 30+ students on his/her own.

Coaches should define the process, such as length of try-out and criteria. As well, it is recommended to ask students how they would like to be informed of selection decisions (i.e., post a list). In the end, stakeholders believe that setting standards for team selection is fair and appropriate.

c. The concept of Athletic Council is most admirable. However, stakeholders feel that this council lacks direction and follow-through. As well, many feel that real issues rarely get addressed. Here are some suggestions:

- *Allow different stakeholders to participate each year.*
 - *Ask all members to come with specific goals and, as a group, determine which ones should be addressed – prioritize.*
 - *Before each meeting, set an agenda and publicize it.*
 - *Designate someone to serve as scribe to take minutes during each meeting.*
 - *Keep track of your goals progress and re-assess as needed.*
 - *At the end of the year, highlight and publish the council’s efforts and achievements.*
- d. *Sport team informational meetings should occur prior to the start of the season. During this meeting, information regarding philosophy, expectations, tryouts, schedules, rules, communication process, etc., should be addressed. As well, emphasizing the “non-negotiables” is critical. For example:*
- *Playing time is a coach’s decision.*
 - *Role on team is a coach’s decision.*
 - *We will not discuss other students with you, only your child.*
 - *Strategies and tactics are a coach’s decision.*
 - *Schedules are determined by the athletic department.*
- In summary, such topics are not up for debate. Yet, coaches should do their best to provide a safe (physically and emotionally) environment where the promotion of learning is the primary objective.*
- e. *The athletic website is under utilized. Take advantage of this vehicle and provide more information such as philosophy, role of the parent, feedback forms, policies, and informational articles.*
- f. *Solicit feedback from students and parents through vehicles such as feedback forms and parent forums. Sample feedback forms are enclosed and should be available mid-way through a season and at the end of a season. By following up with coaches when common themes arise, solutions and strategies can be developed. Hosting parent forums once a month enables the athletic director to directly hear concerns and address them. Just the process of offering such options goes a long way.*

4. Budget/User Fees

Despite the school’s efforts to show transparency regarding the athletic program budget, stakeholders feel woefully confused and misinformed. From a cost standpoint, the athletic program is an exceptional bargain when matched against the overall school district’s educational budget. Manchester Essex athletics represents 1% of the overall school’s budget. Rarely do budget decision-makers see the athletic program in this light. At Manchester Essex, the majority of students participate in the athletic program. If one were to conduct a cost-effectiveness analysis, athletics would surely shine.

- a. *As with most school systems today, user fees are part of the landscape. Manchester Essex is no different than most in this area. So, the challenge becomes one of sharing the information and the rationale behind decisions. Offering informational opportunities through websites, newsletters, and meetings is recommended. Putting this topic on the agenda for coaches preseason stakeholder meetings is another option. Providing a simple handout explaining how the user fee is used and why further educates parents and students. Look carefully at the user fee structure and determine if another model is worth exploring. The current model requires all to pay \$460 (high school) for the first sport. The second sport costs \$290 and the third costs \$115. For the student who plays only one sport, it feels unfair. Would it make sense to charge one flat fee for each season? Given that the number of multi-sport athletes is declining, this might be worth exploring. And, keeping the family cap in place makes great sense.*
- b. *An area that more and more schools are exploring is that of corporate sponsorship. It may be worth analyzing possibilities such as signage, naming rights, announcements, and uniform labeling. This is a complicated option and one that should be studied carefully if there is interest. The philosophy of a community should determine the direction of this strategy. See enclosed rationale and outlines on corporate sponsorship.*
- c. *The topic of an all-sports booster club is addressed under the last domain in this report. Here, the recommendation is to consolidate all outside fundraising groups under one umbrella that services all teams.*
- d. *Utilizing bid lists is an effective ordering process for athletic supplies. By establishing a detailed list by sport, the athletic director can send this to various vendors. This results in healthy comparative shopping and cost savings.*

5. Facilities

The maintenance and care of athletic facilities is often a difficult and costly endeavor.

- a. *It is vital to maintain a regular cleaning and care schedule for all athletic facilities. Regardless of which entity is in charge of a particular facility (town public works, parks & recreation, or school), the athletic director must provide regular inspections and make recommendations.*
- b. *Most stakeholders appreciate the condition of the school's gymnasium and the main artificial turf field. Yet, as these facilities age, care will be critical.*
- c. *Many are concerned about the condition of Sweeney Park and feel it is sometimes unsafe. The same can be said for the Memorial School gymnasium floor, which users feel is dangerously slippery. Both of these facilities should*

- receive appropriate attention in order to avoid any unnecessary mishaps or injuries.
- d. Some have raised the question of the Essex fields and facilities. If Essex can alleviate field/facility issues in Manchester, this should be explored.
 - e. Supervision and security of athletic facilities is key to the wellbeing of users and the health of the facility. When left open and unattended, such facilities can become an attractive nuisance and liability. The gymnasium, the weight room, and the cardio room are frequently open and unsupervised. Students have been observed in the weight room and cardio room without any adult supervision. This is an accident waiting to happen. There is a resounding need to establish policies and procedures regarding facility security and use. Post clear and concise rules in facilities such as the weight room, cardio room, gymnasium, and locker rooms. From a general liability protection standpoint, the posting of rules and regulations is one of your most important protective controls.

7. Other Topics

The domain of “other” includes a variety of topics that deserve attention, according to stakeholder feedback.

- A. *Navigating the landscape regarding college athletics can feel confusing and overwhelming to parents and students. There is a need for the school to provide information and guidance for students who wish to play beyond high school. Here are some strategies to address this need.*
 - 1. *Determine point people (head of counseling, along with athletic director) who can arrange learning opportunities in this area.*
 - 2. *Purchase a handful of guides on this topic from the following associations: NCAA, NAIA, & NJCAA. These are inexpensive and outline the process.*
 - 3. *Invite coaches from various colleges to come to Manchester Essex and discuss their program and the process.*
 - 4. *Invite someone knowledgeable about the process to give a presentation at the school for parents, students and coaches.*
- B. *Many stakeholders feel there is a lack of school spirit. This topic, however, should be viewed as a school-wide mission (versus simply one for athletics). Establishing a committee involving a variety of stakeholders (students, parents, faculty, coaches, administrators) to study this concern and make recommendations makes sense.*
- C. *Providing financial support for the athletic program is of great interest. Outside groups, such as the Booster Club and The Grid-Iron Club, certainly play a role. Yet, there is confusion regarding the role of such clubs. Many feel that this outside support favors certain programs (i.e., football), creating a situation of “the haves and the have nots.” Given that*

approximately 40% of the athletic budget must be generated through user fees and gate receipts, families are feeling the burden. Needless to say, there is overwhelming sentiment that the user fee is too high and problematic. And, this is not uncommon. Athletic user fees have become a familiar and standard aspect of the climate in our state. Sadly, such fees are probably here to stay. As stated earlier in this report, being transparent about such fees and explaining “the whys” is vital. Allow stakeholders to see how the money is spent and the philosophy behind the decisions. Although groups such as the Boosters are not run by the school, a healthy partnership is necessary. The following suggestions address some of the perceived inequities in this area.

- 1. Make a concerted effort to combine any and all outside athletic fundraising groups under one umbrella. Garnering resources and efforts under one all-sports group improves efficiency and perceptions. Details to consider in establishing an all-sports booster club:
 - a. Charge a reasonable membership fee for families and then let them use that membership card to gain free admission to home games.*
 - b. Host a meeting where all team leaders/captains and coaches from all seasons are invited. Introduce club leadership and explain the role of the club. Then allow each team to fill out a form defining what they need for their team (i.e., new goals, portable scoreboard, etc.). After this, the club leaders get together with the athletic director and make decisions, ensuring that all teams get something.*
 - c. Establish several fundraising events each year. Some of the more successful events include: a used sports equipment sale (see enclosed flyer), comedy night, or golf tournament. At Lincoln-Sudbury, the all-sports boosters awarded the program approximately \$50,000 annually. These funds were used for coaching education, equipment, supplies, vehicles and facility support.**
- D. There is a feeling among many stakeholders that football is the privileged sport. What drives this perception are the following:*
- better uniforms*
 - uniforms that are professionally cleaned*
 - nicely published programs for home games*
 - trip to Nantucket*
 - always have access to main artificial turf field*
 - overall better press coverage*

It is not uncommon to have stakeholders from other teams question the status of the football program. By it’s very nature, football is more costly than most sports. And, our culture puts football up on a pedestal, giving it the limelight. Yet, there are ways to even the playing field so to speak.

- 1. Look carefully at the overall uniform situation (as stated earlier in this review)*
- 2. If football uniforms are professionally cleaned, why?*

3. *Consider providing rosters for all home varsity games (all sports) instead of programs. Most programs end up in the trash so keep it simple.*
 4. *If a trip to Nantucket makes sense (i.e., need to fill the schedule), explain the “whys.”*
 5. *If the main field is the only one available for football, explain this so stakeholders understand. As well, do your best to give all varsity teams time on this facility.*
 6. *Arrange a couple of Friday or Saturday night doubleheader soccer, field hockey or lacrosse games. This gives other teams some time under the lights and enhances school spirit.*
 7. *Press coverage is challenging. Oftentimes, if you can get a parent or team member/manager to submit an article, local papers will run it. Regardless, this area is difficult to manage.*
- E. *As with any institution, there are stakeholders who would like to see certain sports added to the mix. Suggestions include: more 9th grade teams, track, volleyball and cheerleading. The process of adding and deleting teams should be a purposeful one. See enclosed document for a sample process.*
- F. *Many stakeholders expressed concern about the health of the football program. Currently, participation numbers are low and this becomes more problematic with injuries. In addition, there is ongoing concern regarding head injuries and concussions. There are products available that improve safety in this sport. For example, ZERO1 makes a helmet that features a multi-layered design that yields upon impact, slowing collision forces before they reach the head and brain. Currently, this company is working on a lower-priced option for high school and youth programs. The Mobile Virtual Player (MVP) Drive is the first remote controlled, self-righting tackling dummy that replicates an in-game experience. It’s specifically engineered to replicate the height and weight of an elite athlete, enabling players to train in a realistic environment. By simulation human motion and reaching speeds of 16 to 18 mph, MVP-Drive enables users to practice passing, tracking, avoiding and tackling with the dangers of player-to-player contact.*
Determining the future status of the football program is complicated and emotional. If Manchester Essex feels this deserves serious study, it makes sense to establish a committee and gather meaningful data. Refer to the appendix document on adding/deleting teams.

APPENDIX TO REPORT:

1. *Process for 2017 Athletic Program Review at Manchester Essex*

2. *Summary notes for all stakeholder meetings on September 18, 25, 27, 28 and October 11.*
3. *Copy of Survey Results*
4. *All-Sports Booster Club Power Point Presentation*
5. *Event Flyer for Used Sports Equipment Sale*
6. *Exploring Sponsorship*
7. *Athletic Programs of Success*
8. *Student Feedback Form*
9. *Parent Feedback Form*
10. *Parent's Role in Athletics*
11. *Process for Adding or Deleting Teams*
12. *Site Director Checklist*
13. *Coach PIP Improvement Plan*
14. *LS Head Coach Evaluation Form*
15. *MIAA Coach Evaluation Packet*
16. *Subvarsity Coach Evaluation Form*
17. *One-on-One College Counseling (option for presentations on navigating the college process for student-athletes)*
18. *National Standards for Sport Coaches (Draft with final document to follow when completed)*