

Introduction:

The Pocantico Hills Modified Sports and Extracurricular Activities Committee was appointed by the Board of Education on May 21, 2007.

The purpose of the committee is to research the issue of merged modified sports teams and opportunities for extracurricular activities in partnership with our three partner school districts, Briarcliff Manor, Pleasantville and Tarrytown and based on this research to prepare recommendations for the Board's review.

Staff and Community Members Named to the Committee are:

Thomas Elliott - Superintendent/Principal - Pocantico Hills Central School
Robert Balog - President - Board of Education - Pocantico Hills Central School
Daniel Linehan - Athletic Director - Pocantico Hills Central School
Chris Drosopoulos - Athletic Director - Briarcliff Schools
Pat Amendola - Athletic Director - Pleasantville Schools
*Charles Scarpulla - Athletic Director - Tarrytown Schools
James McVeigh - School Counselor - Pocantico Hills Central School
Mrs. Patricia Kringas - High School Parent
Mrs. Therese de Chaves - High School Parent
Mrs. Marcia Finsmith - High School Parent
Mr. Kerry Dall - Elementary/High School Parent
Mr. Tony Howard - Elementary/High School Parent
Mr. Wayne Coffey - Elementary/High School Parent

*It should be noted that although Mr. Scarpulla was named to the committee, he was unavailable for any of the meetings and therefore did not participate in our discussions.

Meeting Dates & Minutes:

June 13, June 25, July 16, July 23, August 8 (attached minutes/summaries)

Partner schools = Briarcliff Middle School, Pleasantville Middle School, Sleepy Hollow Middle School

Issues/Items Discussed:

Over the course of five meetings, the focus our discussions was the desire to better the Pocantico Hills School experience for all children in the district, especially in the area of sports and extracurricular activities. Each of the topics listed below was determined to play a critical role in the development of a plan for the future, one that would possibly include mergers.

1. Equity issues.
2. Partner schools modified sports philosophies, including mission statements, guidelines and expectations for athletes and parents.
3. Purpose(s) for merging sports programs as defined by Section I.
4. "Neutrality" between Pocantico Hills and partner schools.
5. Access for Pocantico Hills students to merged sports programs.
6. Considering extracurricular activities that may be shared between Pocantico Hills and partner school districts.
7. Modified Sports Program at Pocantico Hills.
8. State Education Department framework for Interscholastic Athletics Programs
9. Opportunity/Accessibility for all students.
10. Recruiting athletes to high schools during middle school years.
11. The value of a Pocantico Hills School identity.
12. Compatibility of Goals/Policies with partner schools.
13. Financial/Liability Issues as they relate to specific sports, such as football or hockey.
14. Logistics- Transportation/Supervision/Safety/Equipment.
15. Sharing of extracurricular activities with partner school districts.

Findings:

Most schools, including our partner schools, have Interscholastic Sports pamphlets that include a mission statement and outline the programs, something Pocantico Hills does not have. While the wording is different for each school, the message is similar - the focus is not on winning, but on the development of the athlete. Interscholastic sports provide a variety of benefits when clear guidelines are established and followed. Intramurals are used to develop skills necessary to compete on an equal level. The committee was grateful to the input of the Briarcliff and Pleasantville Athletic Directors, we were able to discuss and understand mergers, although neither school has mergers at the Modified level. They were in agreement that mergers were one way to jumpstart a program, but were also in agreement that they carry other challenges. The idea of Pocantico Hills being the host school in a merger received a lukewarm response at best and participation from our partner schools would be doubtful. Validating our concern to maintain neutrality, both Pleasantville and Briarcliff voted "No" during the recent Section 1 merger process involving the modified football team from Sleepy Hollow. Since Mr. Scarpulla was not present at any meeting, we were unable to determine why Tarrytown had approved the merger and how they planned to address the committee's concerns.

While our initial charge was to examine future mergers, it became apparent that the pilot football merger was foremost in our minds and needed more scrutiny especially in light of the comments of Pleasantville and Briarcliff Athletic Directors. The benefit that this merger would bring to a small group of students did not justify the risk to the current soccer program and could potentially jeopardize the future of modified sports at Pocantico Hills. Pocantico Hills is a geographically, economically and ethnically diverse school district. The district pays close attention to providing services that "level the playing field" for all families. Sports mergers violate this equity when district transportation to and from out of district sports sites is not provided. To do so would be cost prohibitive, to fail to do so eliminates access for all of our students. The committee found the following items to be the most significant:

1. Equality and neutrality for decision making must be maintained and used in guiding program development.
2. Each of the partner schools has written policies and mission statements that are distributed to the parents, coaches and athletes.
3. Pre-season Middle School parents meetings are conducted with students and parents to explain expectations and athletic department philosophy and mission statements.
4. The positive elements of intramural sports can be used to further enhance the interscholastic program and/or enhance skill development of other sports not offered at Pocantico (i.e. Track & field or lacrosse stick skills).
5. In a similar, small Pre-K through 8 school district, Garrison, the district's goal regarding modified sports is to provide at least one sport per season for girls and one sport per season for boys.

To that end they requested a merger with Haldane School District (K through 12) in order to field a girl's soccer team at Garrison. In exchange, Garrison allows their boys to participate in the Haldane football and wrestling programs only after it has been determined that there will be enough Garrison boys available for fall soccer. In the spring season, Haldane and Garrison merge for baseball at Haldane and boy's lacrosse at Garrison.

Before the mergers are approved annually, the Garrison physical education teachers survey students to assure that there are enough available for the fall and spring sports offered at Garrison. If there were not enough students available, the merger would not be approved for that year. In the past, Haldane has withdrawn from the lacrosse merger with Garrison based on the needs of their athletic teams. The Garrison School District merges sports only for the sake of maintaining at least one sport for boys and one sport for girls per season. The district does not "hunt" for sports mergers based on the needs or desires of individual students.

List of agreed upon points here:

1. Develop mission statement, pamphlet for athletes and parents describing goals and expectations of modified sports teams each season including behavior guidelines. Mission statement should reflect the NYS Standards and include the elements of Competence, Character, Civility, and Citizenship.
2. Develop school board policy to provide further support and guidance on matters related to athletics.
3. Increase ELO activities and opportunities especially given the array of current offerings and its appeal to students.
4. Recruit high school students and Pocantico alumni to conduct sports specific clinics and skill development workshops.
5. Develop an after school intramural sports program geared towards the 3rd-6th grade population.
6. Develop communication system to inform middle school parents and students of the practice schedule, competition schedules, weather related schedule changes, directions to the schools and playing fields.

7. Due to our small enrollment of students, we are limited in the number of different programs that can be offered and maintained. In-house programs that benefit the most students possible should receive priority.
8. Maintaining neutrality in the high school selection process is the most important consideration in determining involvement with other schools.
9. Concentrate efforts on expanding and improving the existing Pocantico Hills Athletic program before looking outside the district.
10. Football merger needs to be reconsidered in light of findings and discussion.
11. Modified sports at Pocantico Hills is an integral part of our school community and is a reflection of the value we place on each student. We believe in a “No Cut” policy and celebrate the accomplishments of our sports teams regardless of the number of wins and losses. Preservation of our existing programs is paramount and any plans for the future should insure the continued success of those programs.

Recommendations:

The committee has several recommendations that we feel will enhance the Athletic Program at Pocantico Hills.

1. While the committee prefers that the '07 merger be reversed, we understand that the Board has committed to pilot this for the '07 season. However, we request that in the event there are not enough players to field a boys soccer team this fall that the football merger be rescinded.
2. Anticipate the need for counseling and the identification of alternative programs for students who may be disappointed as a result of the reversal of the football merger or the absence of the middle school soccer program.
3. Investigate merger practices at similar smaller school districts (i.e. Garrison) that have a model whereby the home school must field the standard or regular team prior to establishing sports that require a merger agreement.
4. Develop guidelines for future mergers and include an evaluation tool that addresses some pre-prescribed elements and includes reporting to the School board at public session.
5. Develop handout/pamphlet for parents, athletes and coaches outlining rules/policies, expectations and guidelines for behavior.
6. Concentrate efforts on expanding/improving Pocantico Hills programs.
7. Assess programs using rubrics provided by State Education Department to identify areas that need improvement. (See NYS Educational Framework for Interscholastic Athletic Programs)
8. Develop mentoring program to increase exposure to different sports for our younger students.

9. Develop intramurals for elementary house and middle school whenever possible.
10. Increase ELO programs relating to sports and fitness.
11. Increase partner school interplay/programs in recreation framework (not through Section 1).
12. Maintain neutrality in the high school selection process with partner schools.
13. Establish a standing “Pocantico Hills Modified Sports and Extracurricular Activities Committee” to continue to advise and be available for future developments and growth of the programs.

Summary/Conclusion:

Over the course of five meetings and many hours of very productive discussion this summer, our committee has thoroughly examined our school's modified sports and extracurricular programs. While we have touched on a variety of different issues, the vast majority of our time has been devoted to the decision, approved by last year's board, to allow for a trial "merger" this fall that would permit Pocantico students to play football for the Sleepy Hollow modified football team. We have no doubt that those who proposed the plan, and the board, were acting in the belief that it would provide an opportunity for our students where one currently does not exist, and therefore be a positive initiative for all concerned. However, it is the unanimous opinion of this committee - comprised of men and women with diverse backgrounds and children of a wide range of ages - that this merger is not only not a good idea for our school, but also sets a dangerous and troubling precedent as we go forward. It is worth noting that the athletic experts on the committee – athletic directors and coaches with decades of experience in all facets of scholastic sports - were also unanimous in their belief that the proposed merger was ill-conceived - which is why we are respectfully asking the Board to bring up the subject again for a re-vote, in light of the findings of this committee.

What are our concerns about the merger? First and perhaps foremost, we believe it would compromise our district's long-held neutrality vis-a-vis the districts that are our high school partners. As you well know, the three high schools our students can enroll in go to great lengths each year to "sell" themselves as the best option - and they have a significant amount of money riding on the students' responses. How can the neutrality not be hindered by 7th and 8th graders already being part of the Sleepy Hollow football program? We know of at least one youngster who has signed up to play football who is an outstanding athlete that any school would covet. Can anyone dispute that this youngster would almost certainly be heavily recruited, or at least pressured, to stay with Sleepy Hollow - even if academically and socially, another school would suit him better? The committee believes that our school's neutrality would never be the same if we start down the merger road. We are equally mindful of the impact that this, and any other merger, would have on our existing sports programs. We believe that our sports teams, as presently constituted, are an important part of the mix of student-life, and that losing or even jeopardizing some of these teams would be a very unfortunate development. The point isn't that one sport is better than another; it's that we have a Pocantico Hills School team each season, every year without any doubt of sufficient numbers to field that team.

As the athletic directors we spoke to will attest to, mergers are a slippery slope in and of themselves. Typically, they are undertaken by districts to get a sport started - before a school is able to field a team of its own. That is not the case here. This would be a pilot merger for a sport we will probably never be able to offer yet it would bring all the other complicating factors that mergers necessarily bring. Who would be responsible for transporting the child to and from practices and games? How do we handle a situation if the merger school has a different attitude toward sports and competition than we do? How can we be assured that our children will be treated as fairly and even-handedly as a child from the home district?

Again, it is not our committee's intent to assail the motives of those who suggested this merger in the first place. Far from it. In fact, it served to focus attention on our own program and the improvements that can be made. Nonetheless, it is our ardent belief that, upon a thorough exploration of all the issues surrounding the matter, it is in the best interest of the Pocantico Hills School, and the lives of our students, that the Board reconsiders its decision.

Attachments:

Consolidated document of the 3 schools Modified Program Philosophy (Briarcliff, Pleasantville, Sleepy Hollow)

Resources consulted:

New York State Education Department Educational Framework for Interscholastic Athletic Programs

Briarcliff Middle School 2006-2007
Modified Athletics Brochure

Briarcliff High School 2007-2008
Athletics Brochure

Pleasantville High School 2007-2008
Varsity & J.V. Athletics
General Information for Players and Parents

2007-2008 Basic Facts About
Pleasantville High School 2007-2008
Interscholastic Athletics
N.B. Modified Program Philosophy

Sleepy Hollow High School
Fall Sports Packet

Sleepy Hollow High School
Athletics
Contract Booklet for Athletes and parents

Sleepy Hollow High School
Athletic Handbook
For Athletes and Parents

Pocantico Hills School Board Policy
1500 Public use of School Facilities
1500R Public use of School Facilities Regulation

Garrison Union Free School District

ATTACHMENT

Consolidated document of the 3 partner schools Modified Program Philosophy (Briarcliff,
Pleasantville, Sleepy Hollow)

These statements below were a direct extraction from Mission and Policy statements.

Briarcliff Middle School

“Students need to feel that they can succeed in interscholastic play and should also have the opportunity to enjoy a varied athletic program that encourages fitness and a lifetime of healthy choices. All 7th and 8th grade students are encouraged to participate in our interscholastic program. It is our goal for all students to have a meaningful and productive experience. At the modified level the focus is on athletic skills, game rules, and fundamentals of team play, responsibility, teamwork, sportsmanship, and healthy competition. In order for the desired development of the modified athlete and team to occur, commitment and attendance at practice sessions are vital. While maintaining the integrity and competitiveness of the contest, coaches will attempt to ‘play’ everyone, providing there is not a safety concern. Ultimately, the modified program should build student confidence, poise, and strength.”

Pleasantville Middle School

“This program is available to students in the seventh and eighth grades. At this level it is extremely important that all students involved have a meaningful and productive experience. In addition, it is important that all students have reasonable opportunity to test learned skills in a competitive situation and that such competition be as equitable as possible.

The following teams will be ‘capped’

Soccer 22	Basketball 18
Volleyball 15	Softball 18
Field Hockey 22	Baseball 18

These sports have an open enrollment-“no caps”

Football	Track & Field
Wrestling	X-Country

Intramurals will be offered each season after school.

In order for the desired development of the adolescent athlete and team to occur, practice sessions are vital. Occasionally practice or contests will be scheduled on Saturdays. Coaches will attempt to “play” everyone while maintaining the integrity and competitiveness of the contest.

Playing time is at the discretion of the coach!

Exceptional seventh and eight graders may be permitted to try out for a junior varsity or Varsity sport under the State Education Department guidelines called Selection Classification. Criteria that must be met in order to play at an advanced level include parental approval, medical approval, appropriate developmental rating, and passing athletic performance tests administered by our Athletic Director. For additional information about Selection Classification, contact our Athletic Director.”

Sleepy Hollow Middle School

“The modified program is available to all students in the seventh, eighth and, sometimes ninth grades. At this level, the focus is on rules, skills, development, team play, and healthy competition.

While cutting of students is not our policy, the size of a team will be determined by resources, facilities and safe conditions.

Practices or contests are generally scheduled Monday through Friday. However, for numerous reasons, team functions are occasionally scheduled for Saturday and holidays. Opportunities for meaningful contest participation for each team member will exist over the course of the season.”