

“The Commitment Policy”

A Review of Practice



May 9, 2017

Presentation Outline

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Commitment: History

- Early 1980's DHS creates a "Commitment Policy"
 - *Purpose:* deter the use of alcohol and illegal substances for students playing on athletic teams
 - Use of illegal substances strictly forbidden
 - Students sign commitment document
 - Students commit to stay alcohol/ illegal substance free including weekends/vacations. Penalties include for out of school behaviors.
 - Failure to comply results in a 14 day game suspension in season
 - Second offense in season results in a 28 day game suspension

History: Commitment Amended

- 1997: “in the presence of” alcohol was included (being present in a location where alcohol was being illegally served results in a violation)
- July, 2008: DHS Principal, Dan Haron, identifies changes to Commitment in a letter to parents as the result of “multiple conversations, meetings and consultations with students, parent groups, club advisors, coaches and the Board of Education.”

History: Commitment Amended

- 2008 changes to Commitment include:
 - Students must sign a contract before participating in *any extracurricular activity*, inclusive of clubs, athletics and performing arts (non-athletic activities included for the first time)
 - The contract *remains in force throughout the year*
 - Students suspended from athletic participation during an athletic season *may not practice* or play in games
 - Students who violate Commitment are *required to seek help* from school drug & alcohol counselor

History: Commitment Amended--2008

- A student caught out of season will have the incident recorded as a “first offense” and face no additional penalty
 - Students caught subsequently in-season will be suspended 28 days as if this is a second offense (instead of the 14 days for a first offense)
- Administration will “exercise caution and care when handling and assessing information available from the internet”
 - “The administration does not troll the internet in search of student misbehavior.”--Principal Haron

History: Commitment Amended

Principal Haron's 2008 letter to parents, shares goals of changes:

Goal 1

Minimize the amount of drinking and substance abuse on part of students and hold those accountable for behavior that reflects poorly on DHS

Goal 2

To be more consistent between the athletic program and other extra curricular activities run by DHS

Goal 3

To be fair and practical in the administration and enforcement of rules

History: In-School Violations

- Students caught with drugs and/or an illegal substance during the school day or during any school activity that is supervised by school personnel will be suspended from school
 - Students will be excluded from participating in extracurricular activities for 14 days for the first offense and 28 days for the second offense providing they are “in season”
 - School suspension handled separate and distinct from Commitment

History: 1990, Neirad

“In the end it is up to the students to decide how important to them commitment is. The coaches will argue commitment is necessary and that athletes cannot expect to perform their best if they have drinking, taking drugs or smoking. “

“The students who break commitment argue that they perform just as well and they need to have a good time on the weekends. The decision to break commitment comes down to the student’s dedication to their sport and team.”

Commitment is Under Question

As all Darien High School student athletes and parents know, they must sign a commitment form. Many students and parents blindly sign the form without really knowing what its purpose is. The signed commitment is a promise from the athlete that he will not drink alcohol, take drugs, or smoke cigarettes. Almost daily one can see a committed athlete breaking his promise. One wonders whether not athletic commitments are taken seriously.

Coaches seem to have little chance of making sure their athletes are not living up to their commitment. After all coaches are unable to monitor the students athletes at all times. This is why parents are encouraged to observe their children and see if they are living up to their commitment. However, it is rare when a parent contacts his or her child’s coach and reports that the student is breaking commitment. Students are usually caught breaking commitment by faculty and the police department. The Board of Education has a policy that any student caught breaking commitment cannot participate on the team. Coaches, who are required to follow this policy, are often reluctant to do so when the student is one of their star athletes.

In the end it is up to the students to decide how important to them commitment is. The coaches will argue that commitment is necessary and that athletes cannot expect to perform their best if they have been drinking, taking drugs, or smoking. The students who break commitment argue that

they perform just as well and they need to have a good time on the weekends. The

decision to break commitment comes down to the student’s dedication to their sport and team. Student athletes must be reminded that they jeopardize their right to participate on a team by breaking commitment.

Disappointment Strikes When 308 Trip is Canceled

Darien High School and Theatre 308 have missed an incredible opportunity that would have brought prestige to both. Theatre 308 was the one theatre group chosen from the United States to be invited to attend the International Childrens’ Theatre Festival in Russia this January. Superintendent James Loughran denied them permission to go because the trip would take place in the weeks preceding mid-terms, a violation of administrative rules regarding field trips. The reasoning here seems bureaucratic; the rule that preserves the status quo becomes more a educational experience in which Darien students would have interacted with drama students from all over the world. The definition of what makes for good education seems very narrow.

For Theatre 308 to be chosen to participate in the festival was an immense honor. They would have represented the U.S. and DHS in an international capacity. “The educational value of the trip would certainly have outweighed the days of school missed,” said Ms. Nancy Herman. Neirad agrees.

History: 1996, Neirad

“However, the card is in the process of being changed to clearly state that you will be suspended if you are around the other people who are drinking.”

Unclear Commitment Causes Suspension

On Saturday, November 24, two members of the Darien High School Ice Hockey team were suspended and disallowed to play in the traditional Alumni game. The initial punishment was a two week suspension, but later was changed to no suspension due to lack of clarity in the commitment card.

They were suspended for an incident that occurred on the Friday night prior to game-day. That night, the two members of the team were in a parked car with other Darien High School students in the Middlesex Middle School parking lot. Some of the students were drinking but the members of the hockey team were not. A police officer arrived at the parking lot and saw this. To prove that the hockey players were not drinking they took a blood test which they both passed. The next day the members of the hockey team told their coach, Mr. Mosely, what happened. Mr. Mosely tried to contact Jim Girard but was unable to reach him. Since he didn't know the ruling on it, he didn't allow the members of the team to play that night in the Alumni game because he thought they might be suspended for two weeks.

To prove that the hockey players weren't drinking, they took a blood test which they both passed.

When Mosely reached Mr. Girard he said that they shouldn't be suspended because it doesn't say anywhere on the commitment card that you aren't allowed to be around people who are drinking if you're not. However, the card is in the process of being changed to clearly state that you will be suspended if you are around other people who are drinking. Reactions to the new commitment card are still being awaited.

Commitment To Be Mandatory For All Activities

Tough New Reform To Fundamentally Change Role Of Commitment Contract

Nick Phillips
Co-Editor In Chief

The controversial Darien High School athletic commitment contract prohibits athletes from drinking or using illegal substances while maintaining team membership. This contract may soon skyrocket in importance if a new policy currently under discussion is implemented.

This policy, developed by the administration and proposed to the Board of Education, would require a year-long commitment contract for participation in any extracurricular activity. Commitment's traditional area of jurisdiction would be expanded beyond athletics to include clubs and community service groups.

Administrators working in conjunction with Community Council representatives and the Board of Ed are currently fine-tuning the proposal to create a program for implementation during the 2008-2009 school year. "We are changing the philosophical tone of the school," says an adminis-

tration outline of the proposal, "and in order for people to buy into it, we need to do it at the beginning of the year with the appropriate preparation."

Currently, the proposal is well on its way to completion and final approval. Says Principal Dan Haron, "The finishing touches will take place in the coming months and we hope to be able to have a working document by next semester. At that point we hope to start educating the public about it and hope to start enforcing it in the 2008-2009 academic year."

The proposed commitment contract would be personal in nature, emphasizing an agreement to refrain from illegal substances between the individual student and the school. This means that the contract is not activity-specific and will carry the same weight regardless of the number of activities a student is involved. A casual member of the Fishing Club and a three-sport varsity athlete will be affected in identical measure.

A new "three strike policy" is

being discussed as a punishment for the breaking of this new contract. Strike one is a 14-day suspension from all extracurricular activities. Strike two is different for athletics and other

"We are
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extracurriculars. If an athlete's violation occurs in the same season as the first violation, the athlete will be suspended for the rest of the season. If it occurred in a different season, strike two constitutes a 28-day suspension. All other extracurricular activities carry a 28 day suspension. Strike three is a permanent suspension from all extracurricular activities for the remain-

der of the school year.

Additionally, the concept of "between seasons" is abolished. Violations that occur "between seasons" will merely be accumulated for the next season. A student remains under the contract for the entire school year.

The administration supports this new policy, pointing to a number of potential benefits. Mr. Haron hopes for "a more fair policy vis-à-vis athletics and other extra curricular activities," as well as "a reduction in teen alcohol consumption and [a] building [of] awareness about the problem of underage drinking." Indeed, the proposal will satisfy many who complain of an unfair difference in standards for athletes and other students.

Potential drawbacks of the policy have been recognized by the administration. For instance, the policy outline says that banning a student from all extracurricular activities if he or she refuses to sign the contract is "too Draconian." The administration also

worries about a lack of meaning for the contract if it is no longer attached to an adult or coach who gives additional authority to its signature.

Unsurprisingly, many students oppose the new contract. Senior Community Council Representative Evelyn Corder is skeptical about the program's success, saying, "The administration says they want good clean students representing our school in clubs and activities, but I think what will happen is that representation in these activities will suffer." Corder believes that students will stop participating in clubs altogether rather than sign such a strict contract. "Teens are going to find a way to drink no matter what, and if that means that they stop participating in clubs and activities, they will."

Corder also points to possible unintended negative consequences that the contract will have on charitable clubs, like Invisible Children, China Care and Building With Books.

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Questions?

II. 2015, Introduction to Commitment

Introduction: 2015-2016 School Year

- Immediate issues with Commitment raised to the level of Superintendent that included:
 - Disparity between how students were treated “in season or out of season”
 - Parties reportedly proliferate just prior to the beginning of a new season
 - The random identification of students
 - Police share reports with DHS staff
 - The use of the tip line as a way of identifying students
 - Students fleeing from parties to avoid being caught and the risk of driving intoxicated
 - A lack of fairness for students staying behind at parties to care for intoxicated friends being treated the same as students who were drinking

Introduction: Thriving Youth Task Force

- Data from the Thriving Youth Task Force survey given to Darien High School students suggests students are involved in the use of alcohol and illegal substances at an alarming rate
- Survey data:
 - 25.6% of DHS students consumed alcohol more than 6 times in the past 30 days
 - 51% of Darien teens don't think their parents have a problem with them drinking
 - 58% of the juniors and 67% of seniors surveyed said they they consumed alcohol in the past 30 days

Introduction: A Study of Commitment

- ***Defined Problem: Our Darien youth are involved with alcohol and illegal substances at a rate that is unhealthy for their well being.***
 - Agreement on this is fundamental to exploring Commitment and making changes
 - Lack of agreement on this belief yields any future work meaningless
- Based on the facts presented, a comprehensive committee was established in the 2016-2017 school year to fully study the problem and to help guide potential next steps

Questions?

III. Committee Work: Data Collection

Committee Formed

- Coaches
- DHS Principal and Asst. Principal
- DHS Parents
- Central Office Admin.s
- Athletic Director
- Board Members
- Darien Police

Carrie Bernier: *The Community Fund of Darien*

Jonathan Bradley: *Coach*

Jeff Brameier: *Teacher/Coach*

Anne-Lise Brown: *Parent/Coach*

Michael J. Burke: *Board of Education Member*

Lisa Cassidy: *Parent/Member of Blue Wave Booster Club*

Susie Da Silva: *Assistant Supt. of Curriculum and Instruction K-12*

Nick DeMaio: *Teacher/Coach*

Ellen Dunn: *DHS Principal*

Susan Hayes: *Parent*

Emily Larkin: *Thriving Youth Program Coordinator, The Community Fund of Darien*

Laurie LaRusso: *Teacher/Coach*

Chris Manfredonia: *Director of Athletics*

Mo Minicus: *Coach*

Steve Norris: *Coach*

Tom O'Donnell: *Coach*

Duane Lovello: *Former Darien Police Chief*

Leigh Parson: *Coach*

Kathrine G. Stein: *Board of Education Member*

Michael E. Sullivan: *DHS Assistant Principal*

Marj Trifone: *Teacher/Coach*

Committee Work: Police as Community Partners

- Collaborated with Chief of Police throughout the process
- Student Resource Officer critical in all of the discussion, providing valuable insights
- Solving a community problem works best when schools work together with outside groups with common mission

Committee Work: Objectives

Objective 1

Identify strengths of current practice using data wherever possible

Objective 2

Identify weaknesses of current practice using data wherever possible

Objective 3

After consideration of 1 & 2 create possible solutions for change.

Committee Work: Process

- Work began in July of 2016 gathering anecdotal information from each of the committee members
- Committee met 12 times through May 2017

Committee Work: Initial Conversations

- Committee acknowledged unanimously a continued problem based on their experience with students use of alcohol and illegal substances
- Unanimous belief that any meaningful consequence needed to involve parents and students in order to create long term change
- Firm belief that inconsistencies exist in identifying violators during non-school hours/weekends
- Consistent belief that when students violated Commitment in school, the imposition of consequences were far more acceptable
- Agreement that “Commitment” was a very complicated issue and that there would be many differing opinions on solutions

Committee Work: Goals

Goal 1

To decrease the amount of alcohol and substance abuse on the part of our students (same as 2008 goal)

To create impactful, measurable positive change in behaviors as it applies to alcohol and substance abuse

Goal 2

To better educate our students regarding alcohol and substance abuse

Goal 3

To eliminate areas where school discipline appears ineffective or unfair in its implementation

Committee Work: Collecting Information

- High School provides actual numbers on Commitment violators for the past 2 years
- Meetings/focus groups held with:
 - Students
 - Team Captains
 - Non-athletes/students involved in clubs and performing groups
 - Parents: An effort made to get a good cross section of parents

Committee Work: Darien High School Data

2014-2015

- 25 students in-school alcohol/drug incidents
 - 6 of which resulted in Commitment violations
- 0 out of school violations

2015-16

- 17 in-school alcohol/drug incidents
 - 10 of which resulted in Commitment violations
- 27 out-of-school violations
 - 16 of which resulted in Commitment violations

Committee Work: Student Feedback

- Strikingly similar to 1990 Neirad article:
 - Openness about drinking behavior prominent
 - Commitment has no effect on them as a deterrent
 - “Commitment is to their teammates and coaches”
 - Drinking viewed as almost acceptable behavior
 - Repeated comments that the schools (MMS & DHS) have not done an adequate job around educating students on alcohol and drug abuse

Committee Work: Parent Feedback

- Concern about the safety of their children
- Concern regarding the imposition of equitable punishment of students
- Some concern about losing a “tool” if Commitment was removed
 - Others acknowledge that it has little impact on students behavior
 - Ninth grade parents more concerned about changes in Commitment than parents of older students
- Belief that more education on the topic for parents as well as their children would be helpful
- Some concerned about the need to replace Commitment with something else. Fear failure to do so would send a wrong message to students
- Many parents wondered how the police and school interacted with respect to weekend parties

Questions?

IV. Committee “Takeaways”

Committee: Takeaways

- Our current Commitment is not working:
 - It is filled with inconsistencies
 - Despite suspending 26 students for 14 days of activities last year as a result of violating commitment this represents only a fraction of the number of students who attend parties on any given weekend, let alone for a full year
- Data clearly indicates the use of alcohol and illegal substances is too high among our students
- As a school district we can do a better job of educating both our students and parents. Meaningful change will occur only by reaching out to both students and their parents
- There is a striking similarity to what students in 1990 and 2017 say about commitment suggesting very little has changed in 27 years

Questions?

VI. Possible Solutions

Possible Solutions: The Committee Considered

1. Increasing the penalty from the school when a violation occurred
2. Volunteering/community service for an infraction
3. Student attendance at a “diversion” program where the consequence would be reduced as a result of participation
 - a. Model would resemble taking a driving class to reduce the number of points on your license following a driving infraction
 - b. Student attendance at a weekend educational program to reduce length of suspension
4. Adding a significant educational component built into the preseason meeting and making student and parent attendance mandatory prior to student practicing

Possible Solutions: The Challenge

- The committee struggles with the current Commitment practices in that out-of-school behavior is and has been ineffective for years as noted earlier
 - Changing the penalty for a violation with a flawed identification process does not support changing behavior
 - School staff forced to act on external information provided by police
- The challenge is to replace the oversight of the Commitment for outside school activities with a practice that will positively influence students' decision making

Possible Solutions: The Need for Education (Goal 2)

- What do schools do well? Educate!
 - Each year, prior to participation of the first season on an athletic team or extracurricular activity, all DHS students, and at least one of parent must participate in a 1.5 hour educational program created by the school
 - Educational curriculum to include:
 - Legal/police information around alcohol and illegal substances
 - Anecdotal/media presentations
 - Direct alcohol and drug educational information
 - Offered multiple times prior to each season
 - Model similar to parking on campus
 - Developed by school personnel
 - **Failure to attend results in postponing participation in activity**

Possible Solutions: Commitment for In-School Violations

- There is a consistency and fairness about how this enforced that seems to satisfy the entire committee
- The recommendation would be to leave this section of the Commitment unchanged.

Possible Solutions: A Work in Progress

- An ongoing evaluation of the problem, collecting data and making adjustments accordingly must be part of any plan

- Follow up after year one should include:
 - Analysis of new data
 - Focus group feedback from constituents
 - Report to the community

Possible Solutions: Next Steps

- This is the start of the discussion with the Board Of Education and by extension the community
- The committee will be invited to our next Board Of Education meeting
- We will gather more information from our meetings and listen further to input from the Board of Education
- There is no timeline for a rollout out
 - Possible Fall season but practically, could roll out prior to any season including Winter and Spring

Questions?