

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

We are writing to address the questions and concerns that have arisen as the result of widespread media coverage regarding our boys lacrosse team's recent forfeiture of their Division 4 State Semifinals game that was to take place on June 9. Originally, we had hoped to avoid having to provide extensive details about the grounds for the suspension of six seniors on the team. Unfortunately, the information that apparently has been provided to the media and has been circulated is fundamentally misleading. Accordingly, we are obligated to ensure that an accurate account is presented to the public.

Central to the media coverage has been the narrative of the allegedly "fake" cigars. The facts are as follows:

On Monday morning, June 8th, the Superintendent, Principal, Athletic Director, and the MIAA received an email that included two photographs of seven Ipswich High School senior boys who appeared to be smoking cigars at a local beach after graduation that took place on June 7th. Six of the boys were members of the lacrosse team.

The first photograph – and the only one of the two which apparently was provided to the media - showed the boys holding full length cigars with the cigar bands visible. The second photograph – which apparently was not provided to the media - showed the cigars smoked down significantly; a cloud of smoke surrounding one of the students; and a torch type lighter visible in the hand of another of the students. Shortly after reviewing the photographs, the District learned that the photographs were posted on the Facebook page of one of the players' parents. Based on the mandatory MIAA Chemical Health policy, which is also incorporated in the Ipswich Student-Athlete Handbook, school administrators commenced an investigation, including interviewing the involved students and/or their parents and giving them the opportunity to explain their version of events.

During the investigation, administrators were told that the cigars were "fake" and that in fact they did not contain tobacco but, instead, chamomile and English breakfast tea. In support of this claim administrators were shown a receipt from Shaw's grocery store.

When District administrators met on the morning of June 9 to review the evidence they had obtained, it was determined that the cigars were in fact not "fake", as they had been told. As noted, one photograph showed smoke and a lighter, as well as the fact that the cigars were significantly shorter than they were in the first photograph. In addition, the photographs had been removed from the Facebook page, and the receipt allegedly supporting the claim that they were filled with tea had the date and time smudged out.

Accordingly, the administrators concluded that there had been a violation of the Chemical Health Policy, which requires suspension, and the families of the six members were informed that they were suspended for the Semifinal game.

Later that afternoon, the rest of the boys lacrosse team reported to campus to board the rented coach bus to Scituate for their game. Rumors of a team “walkout” began to spread and three players stated that they refused to play, in solidarity with their suspended teammates. This left only 11 players available to play in the Semifinal game in a sport which requires ten players to be on the field at any given time (subject to being a “man down” for penalties). Mr. Mitchell, Mr. Gallagher, and coach Glenn Foster met to discuss the situation and determine how to handle it. Coach Foster decided to poll his players to see what they wanted to do, and the resulting vote was overwhelmingly in favor of forfeiting the game. The District decided to honor the will of the players.

On Thursday morning, June 11, and in light of the uproar generated in the media, Mr. Mitchell went to Shaw’s Supermarket to see if they could reproduce the receipt that had been presented as evidence in order to determine the actual date of the purchase of the ingredients that allegedly comprised the content of the “fake cigars.” The manager at Shaw’s was able to print out a receipt that matched the details of the purchased tea bags with a date of June 8th at 1:03 pm, Mr. Mitchell had alerted the six families about the potential violation and the impending investigation by email at 12:41 pm on June 8th. The receipt indicates that the “tea” allegedly used in the “fake” cigars was actually purchased 20 minutes after the families were notified of the potential violation.

We fully understand the disappointment, frustration, and emotions that have accompanied this outcome. As educators and school leaders, we are always disappointed when we must make difficult decisions such as this. But as educators and school leaders, we also have the responsibility to investigate possible violations of the rules, to provide students with due process, to carefully review the facts, and to follow and enforce established policies, making decisions that uphold the standards to which all students are held. One of the most important lessons we teach young people is that choices have consequences, even when those consequences are difficult or painful. While this outcome was heartbreaking for the student-athletes, their families, their coaches, and our school community, we remain committed to applying our policies consistently and acting in what we believe to be the best interests of the integrity of our educational and athletic programs.

Dr. Brian J. Blake,
Superintendent of Schools

Jonathan Mitchell,
Ipswich High School Principal