Written by Carol Pomeday
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School Board leader's verbal confrontation at cross-country meet leads to discipline, new policy

Cedar Grove-Belgium School Board President Les Paul, who has been a volunteer assistant high school cross-country and track coach for five years, was removed from the cross-country program following a heated verbal confrontation with a spectator at the Sept. 29 Sheboygan County cross-country meet.

The School Board is now in the process of adopting a policy that prohibits board members from being involved in the day-to-day operations of any high school athletic team.

Supt. Steve Shaw, following an investigation into the incident by High School Principal John Hocking, made the decision to dismiss Paul, saying he violated the guidelines for volunteer assistant coaches that he had signed in May. The guidelines state "inappropriate conduct will not be tolerated and any substantiated allegations will result in disciplinary actions being taken which could include dismissal from the position."

When it was reported Paul had been at a practice after the incident, the board sent a letter to him stating its support for the dismissal and informing him of the policy being developed.

"He can participate as a parent, but not as a coach," Shaw said.

The issue is complicated not only because as a board member Paul sets school policy and evaluates administrators and other coaches, but also because the district's home course is on Paul's property.

At the Oct. 14 School Board meeting, the team was told it can practice at the course under the direction of head coach Ron Wood and with Paul's permission.

“Of course they’re welcome here any time,” Paul said Monday.

Although he admits he made a bad decision when he confronted the spectator, Jon Damkot, Paul believes his dismissal is unwarranted and hurts the team.

Since the incident, Paul has attended meets as a parent and said runners seek his advice from the sidelines. He has two daughters, Marina and Chloe, on the team.

Damkot, a Cedar Grove-Belgium graduate, said Tuesday he wants to put the incident behind him.

“I read the minutes (of the Oct. 14 School Board meeting) and I can tell from what was said that the truth has been lost,” Damkot said.

“The school knows what happened and will back me up. It’s been so hard for so many people and I don’t want to make life hard for the team. It’s been difficult for them. I think we all have to move past it.”

Damkot refused to discuss the incident further.

At the Oct. 14 meeting, Paul said Damkot approached him at the Sheboygan County meet, questioned his coaching strategy and made comments about his family. He initially walked away, Paul said, however, the comments “stewed on him” and he later confronted Damkot.

“I got in his face,” Paul said.

He apologized to the team and parents who filled the room, then left the meeting.

“I’m truly sorry for how two people not seeing eye to eye and the stupid approach on my part to handle the situation has hurt the team,” Paul said.

“I’m not sure if I will be allowed to continue as a coach in this district, and I’m not sure if I will be able to continue as board president.”

He said he was criticized by administrators for being too intense and too passionate and it was suggested he may be better suited to coaching at the college level rather than high school.

Paul said Monday he hopes he will be allowed to coach track in the spring and cross-county next fall. If he has to choose between being a coach or a School Board member, he will choose coaching.

“In a heartbeat,” he said. “We wrestled with this every year (when his volunteer position was approved by the board), and I offered to step down (as a board member).”

Parents of the cross-country team were notified of Shaw's decision in an Oct. 2 letter. Shaw also met with runners.

Some parents believe Paul was dealt with more harshly because he is a board member and said he should be given a second chance.

"The only difference is I was more involved than if he was a regular coach," Shaw said. "Because he is a School Board member, I made the decision. Otherwise, the athletic director and John (Hocking) would have handled it.

"We determined as administrators that it (the incident) was severe enough to remove him for the rest of the season."

At the Oct. 14 meeting, parent Stuart Merritt said that after talking with Shaw and other coaches in the conference, he believes the punishment is a little harsh.

"The CLC (Central Lakeshore Conference) policy is a one-week suspension. We propose a two-week suspension and sending Les to an anger management course," Merritt said.

"There is a gentleman's agreement that you do not question a coach during a meet. If you have a disagreement with the coach, take it up after the meet. Les actually showed a lot of restraint. There was a lot said. Unfortunately, he let it stew and made a bad decision.

"We're supporting Les, but we don't excuse him."

Cross-country runner Josh Mulloy said Paul is like a second father to him and has helped him not only with running but also in his college selection.

"At the last meet, it was so somber. It's like a divorce," Mulloy's mother Sherry said.

At the meeting, board member Jim Lautenschlaeger, who was previously approved as a volunteer assistant coach for the junior varsity girls' basketball team, resigned from that position.

The Curriculum and Policy Committee on Tuesday worked on a conflict of interest policy for School Board members that not only prohibits members from being coaches or advisers for high school athletics and other extracurricular activities but governs other possible conflicts.

That policy will go to the School Board for review on Nov. 11.

Les Paul