

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Play Fair Athletic-Eligibility Campaign: Project Summary

Research: District staff gathered information from parents, students, coaches and school staff, looking for the main issues that caused the athletic-eligibility crisis. Informal polls were conducted, which indicated many staff members were not aware of the need to thoroughly check student-residency forms for accuracy and veracity.

A staff task force was created, comprised of representatives from the athletics, student assignment, communications, legal and law enforcement departments, as well as the superintendent and chief operating officer. The task force met weekly to review procedures and bring new ideas back to schools and departments for input.

The superintendent also formed a 24-member athletic eligibility advisory committee. The committee included parents and school representatives, as well as individuals with expertise in athletics, business, ethics, compliance and legal matters. The committee spent four months studying and learning about athletic-eligibility issues. The staff task force reported its research to members of the athletic eligibility advisory committee, who shared the information with their businesses, neighborhoods, churches and schools. Committee members gathered the reaction, ideas and input from their contacts in the community at large and shared those with the larger group to ensure the district was responding to all concerns.

The research showed major issues with athletic-eligibility across the district. The Play Fair campaign was launched with four main goals:

- Educate key audiences (district employees, parents, students, community, media) about Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools operating procedures for ensuring athletic eligibility
- Clarify existing student-assignment and Board of Education rules and policies regarding athletic eligibility
- Clarify changes to student-assignment rules and policies regarding athletic eligibility
- Increase the awareness of district employee, student and parent responsibility and the consequences for athletic-eligibility violations

Planning/Analysis:

Primary Audience:

- The primary target audience was the parents of the more than 16,000 student-athletes in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. The high number of ineligible athletes revealed that parents were either unclear on the district's residency rules, or they were not concerned about violating the rules. The school district had to show it was serious about enforcing the residency policy, and that parents had to take responsibility for telling the truth.

A district communications survey showed that most parents received their information directly from their schools. The Play Fair campaign was structured to ensure schools were the primary point of contact for parents. Parents and students were required to attend athletic-eligibility informational meetings at the school site, as well as sign honor codes, before students were allowed to compete. Telephone Connect-ED messages were sent to all parents from school principals; brochures were available in school offices and at athletic events; posters were provided and posted in high-traffic areas, and school athletic directors and principals were designated the primary points of contact for questions and/or concerns.

Secondary Audiences:

- There were multiple secondary audiences for the Play Fair campaign. First, students had to be educated on the residency rules and the consequences of violations, including potential forfeiture of their team's entire sports season. In addition, educating athletic directors, coaches and school staff on the residency rules was key to ensuring fairness on and off the sports field. The third audience included the Charlotte and Mecklenburg County community, which had lost trust in the district. The fourth audience was the local media. Television stations and the local newspaper

launched their own investigations into the athletic-eligibility issues, which included home visits, interviews and multi-part series pieces. It was clear that the issue needed to be communicated with clarity and candor to stem the media tide.

The Play Fair campaign reached students at their schools through posters, brochures and meetings with coaches and athletic directors. In addition, the district's TV station created a student-friendly video that was shown in all middle and high schools twice a year. The video was also aired on the district's TV station during publicized times, and was available to parents on request.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools athletic directors and coaches were required to attend athletic-eligibility informational meetings before every sports season. Play Fair-branded handouts were provided, including brochures, posters and the required honor codes. Employees also accessed in-depth information on the internal and external Web sites, as well as through the weekly electronic newsletter.

The Play Fair campaign reached the community and media by providing public access to the athletic-eligibility advisory committee meetings. Meeting agendas and minutes were posted on the district's Web site after each meeting and media releases communicated key messages throughout the process. The Play Fair campaign was launched with a media briefing, which included posters, brochures, copies of the district-produced DVD, and interviews with the superintendent and members of the advisory committee.

Implementation/Communication: The goal of the Play Fair campaign was to educate parents, students, district staff and the community about the rules for participating in athletics and the consequences for not complying. In addition, the campaign was created to show the community at large that Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools took athletic-eligibility violations seriously listened to the public's concerns, and responded.

The multi-year campaign began with the research phase in the spring of 2008. A comprehensive communications plan was developed in June of 2008, which included creating the staff task force and the community committee to analyze the issues and craft recommendations. After the recommendations were in place, the Play Fair multi-media campaign launched in August of 2008 at the high school level with both internal and external communications tactics. Internal tactics included posters, brochures, an athletic-eligibility video, Intranet Web site, e-mail to the entire staff of 19,000 employees, and mandatory meetings for all principals, athletic directors and coaches. External tactics included a media briefing, Web site stories, media releases, interviews with staff and members of the community advisory committee, and full-color brochures and posters distributed to all schools. The district created an e-mail address and hotline for students, parents and community members to report suspected violations. In addition, all student-athletes and their parents were required to attend mandatory meetings and sign an honor code before sports seasons began.

After evaluating the success of the high school campaign, the Play Fair message was adjusted and rolled out to the middle schools in the fall of 2009. Many of the same communications tools were included in the middle school campaign, with a rewritten brochure, Web site content, and parent and student meetings and honor codes geared toward the younger audience.

Evaluation: The number of athletic-eligibility violations dropped by more than 65 percent after the Play Fair campaign was launched. In the first year of the campaign, the district received 425 reports of suspected violations through the e-mail and hotline that were established. Media reports lauded the district's efforts to respond to community concerns.

In addition, 100 percent of district athletic directors polled one year after the Play Fair campaign launched said they felt it was a success. They said parents and students were aware of the rules, as well as the potential penalties for violations. At least one other school district in North Carolina has adopted the campaign, nearly in its entirety, as an example of a successful communications plan.