**Open letter to the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education**

September 19, 2016 Meeting

Good evening Dr. Ramos and members of the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education.

My name is Juani Tantillo, and I represent Columbia High School baseball players and parents, and Essex County baseball coaches who are here tonight in support of Coaches Fischetti and Becht. Out of respect for everyone’s time, we have prepared one letter, from all of us to all of you.

We are here to address the current situation with the coaches, the allegations of HIB that have plagued them for two years, and the apparent recent decision not to rehire them for the 2017 season.

The community deserves to hear about the misjudgments, mistakes, and general mismanagement by the school district in the handling of this matter.

Over the past two years, there has been a lack of due process, double jeopardy, and significant reputational damage to coaches who have been exonerated of the *same* HIB complaints on multiple occasions. This type of witch hunt may have worked in Salem in the 1600’s, but it’s not how things should work in South Orange-Maplewood today.

This situation began in 2014, when initial HIB allegations were made. After an investigation, in January 2015, Acting Superintendent Memoli cleared the coaches of any wrongdoing relative to the HIB complaints. The matter was considered closed.

Although the coaches were cleared of the 2014 HIB allegations, they acknowledged the occasional use of inappropriate language – something that *should not* constitute HIB – and voluntarily took courses on coaching behavior and sensitivity, demonstrating their commitment to continued improvement.

Subsequently, in 2015 the coaches were reappointed, and led the team to its best season ever.

Fast forward to August 27, 2015. Shortly after Dr. Ramos started his job with the district, he sent a letter to parents of two former players who claimed that the coaches bullied their sons. He told them that he was reversing all findings, and affirming the HIB claims. Dr. Ramos had never even met or spoken to the coaches. They were not even aware of the pending HIB complaints. And he did this despite the fact that Acting Superintendent Memoli previously had cleared the coaches of some of these same claims.

Why did Dr. Ramos take this action, an action that would lead to a lawsuit by one of the players six months later? That question was answered the very next day, when district HIB coordinator and in-house counsel, Phil Stern, sent an email to the attorney for Coach Fischetti and Coach Becht, stating, “The only reason [Dr. Ramos] is [reversing the HIB dismissals] is to end the debacle, and [not because he was] making a decision on the merits [of the claims against] your clients…Please assure your clients that the sole purpose of this action is to end it – for your clients, and for the District.”

So now we have it in writing that Dr. Ramos intentionally reversed the HIB findings to appease a couple of complaining parents. The coaches were found guilty not because they actually were, but because it was convenient to blame them.

This is a disturbing violation of the principles of due process and fairness that we hold dear. It is reprehensible.

Months later, faced with a huge outpouring of support at the February 2016 board meeting, Dr. Ramos made a qualified recommendation for the re-appointment of the coaches, pending the results of yet another investigation into these same HIB allegations.

Dr. Ramos also met with Coach Fischetti and other administrators. He proposed a resolution: If the investigation found the coaches guilty of HIB in 2015, they would resign. If not, he would recommend their reappointment.

Now it’s April 2016. The district hired Dr. Leroy Seitz and started the investigation. Dr. Seitz met with Coaches Fischetti and Becht, and discussed the 2015 allegations with them.

Five months later, in August 2016, presumably based on the Seitz investigation, the coaches were cleared of all 2015 HIB claims. Yet somehow, after all this, the coaches were still asked to resign.

Why? Allegedly because Dr. Seitz found that they used inappropriate language in 2014. However, (1) Dr. Ramos himself has characterized this as a ‘minor infraction’ and previously acknowledged that a finding of inappropriate language would not serve as a basis for their termination; (2) Neither Dr. Ramos nor Dr. Seitz ever discussed allegations of inappropriate language from 2014, so the coaches never had a chance to defend themselves during the investigation; (3) To this day, the district has refused to tell the coaches what inappropriate language they are alleged to have used, when they used it, and to whom it was directed; and (4) Finally, to the extent that these coaches, like all coaches, used inappropriate language from time to time does not amount to a finding of HIB under the law. Plus, it was dealt with previously by Mr. Memoli – after which the coaches voluntarily underwent training.

The lack of due process, the rush to judgment, and now a desire by the superintendent and the board to scapegoat these coaches in order to "put this whole thing behind them," and cover up their own mistakes is shocking to members of this community and should be embarrassing to you.

These coaches are community members. They grew up here, attended our schools, teach and work in our community, and make positive contributions every day. What kind of a community are we if this is how we treat each other -- by not affording our educators and coaches the basic rights that we supposedly stand for?

The coaches’ lives have been ripped apart for two years. Taxpayer money has been wasted. Mismanagement has resulted in one lawsuit, and now has opened the door for another.

As parents, taxpayers and voters – we are appalled that our district administration and Board of Education would turn away from the facts to appease a few people or to settle a personal score, rather than stand up for fairness. Our voices count. They count heavily. Furthermore, our sons feel that their voices are unheard…and that justice does not prevail. Due process and fairness have been thrown out the window, and your credibility is now on the line.

As members of the Board of Education, you not only have the opportunity to make this right, but it is your OBLIGATION. It is what we elected you to do.

Thank you.

*[This letter is submitted on behalf of current and former Columbia High School parents and players, and Essex County High School baseball coaches, that support Coach Fischetti and Coach Becht.]*