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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

February 16, 2021

Hon. Bill de Blasio
Mayor, City of New York
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Dear Mayor de Blasio:

I write to support the call to reinstate sports sponsored by the Public School Athletic League (PSAL). In doing so, the City of New York should adopt the New York State Department of Health (DOH) guidance that allows those sports defined as “high risk” (indoor and close contact) to occur despite COVID-19, with the appropriate precautions in place.

There are important reasons to allow high school athletes to compete even amidst the pandemic. Abundant research on the benefits of high school sports participation on student achievement is one example. Another is that school sports are a proven way to help students cultivate personhood.

According to Jennifer Brown Lerner, Deputy Director for Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program, “There’s unbelievable opportunity to think about sports as a place in which young people can take ownership of their own learning... One thing that great coaches do is really focus in on that individual relationship with each player. They also create a space and environment and a culture that honors the relationship that other players have with each other.”

COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted communities of color. There is overwhelming evidence that schoolhouses and traditional academic settings fall short of empowering those same communities. It is critical to provide spaces that allow students to take hold of their agency and engage in activities that foster rich social and emotional development.

The following examples show that the NYC PSAL need not remain closed. New York State’s recent decree that “high-risk” sports are allowed to take place is an acknowledgement of what so much of the country has already realized; the risk can be mitigated. Schools in Westchester County and under the Catholic High School Athletic Association (CHSAA) have been proactive. Archbishop Stepinac High School (White Plains, NY) held basketball tryouts on Friday, February 5. Student athletes have been on the court for practice in the subsequent week (beginning February 8) wearing face coverings. Their track team has been competing with no fans in attendance.

Currently, Westchester County has a COVID positive test rate of 8.1%, higher than some NYC localities. However, with the use of important safety measures, student athletes are being kept safe. New York City should follow Westchester's lead and allow PSAL athletes to take their respective fields of play.

There is a proactive national conversation about re-opening high school sports that New York City is neglecting to join. In New Jersey, no fans were allowed at indoor sporting events until recently; the rules have now changed to allow 2 spectators per athlete, and practices and matches, including spectators, will be subject to indoor gathering limits of 35% capacity and no more than 150 people. In Michigan, hockey and basketball players must have a negative antigen test 24-hours prior to a contest or a negative swab test 72-hours prior to a contest. In Colorado, masks must be worn by all athletes with exceptions for swimming, hockey and spirit activities. For wrestlers, athletes are required to wear masks and must learn remotely regardless of how the larger student body is learning. These safety measures provide a model for PSAL to move ahead.

On February 6th, 2021, I joined the Bronx/Manhattan rally with football players and their coaches to call for high school sports to return. One strong message from coaches and their former students now playing sports in college was that sports opened up scholarships for them. However, going forward, that opportunity will not be available for any NYC high school athlete because the City is not allowing "high risk" high school sports to restart.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gale A. Brewer". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Gale A. Brewer
Manhattan Borough President