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Erie schools ponder combining sports

Wednesday

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Consolidation plan is related to financial recovery proposal. It would create one team in each sport.

By Ed Palattella ed.palattella@timesnews.com

As it seeks to remain financially solvent, the Erie School District is considering a plan to combine all its high school sports programs to save money and make them more competitive.

The district is hoping its unique financial status with the state will allow it to make the sweeping changes on the playing field.

The Erie School Board on Wednesday night gave its consent for the administration of Superintendent Jay Badams to present the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association with a proposal to consolidate the district's 20 high school sports programs starting in 2018-19.

The changes would create one team in each sport, such as football, basketball and soccer, for students at all of the district's four high schools - Central Career & Technical School, East, Northwest Pennsylvania Collegiate Academy and Strong Vincent.

Central Tech, East and Strong Vincent now have their own teams for most boys and girls sports. Collegiate students can play for those teams.

If the PIAA were to approve the sports consolidation plan, the School Board still would need to decide whether to adopt it, said John Dahlstrand, the Erie School District's director of state and federal programs and athletics.

"We are looking at one school for all sports," said Dahlstrand, who has been working on the proposal. "We know we will have some hurdles putting this in, but we are willing to entertain the possibilities."

He said they could entertain two schools for one sport.

The consolidation would affect about 1,500 high school athletes in the 11,500-student Erie School District, according to district figures.

Dahlstrand said the consolidation would save the district more than \$1 million a year by reducing the annual budget for high school sports from \$1.5 million to \$300,000 to \$400,000. He said the plan would also make many of the teams more competitive. Low participation has plagued many of the district's athletic teams for years.

PIAA rules typically prohibit such consolidations. A year ago, for example, the PIAA rejected the Erie School District's request for a special exception that would have allowed some of the district's boys athletic programs to merge in a co-op among the high schools. The PIAA, faced with different enrollment statistics, approved a co-op for girls cross country, golf, tennis, swimming and track and field.

The consolidation request would cover all the sports at all the Erie School District's high schools. The changes would not affect sports for middle and elementary school students.

The Erie School District plans to pursue consolidation by asking for an exception in light of the state Legislature placing it under what is known as "financial watch" status in July. In exchange, the district got \$4 million in emergency state aid to keep the school system solvent this fiscal year.

The Erie School District is the only one of Pennsylvania's 500 school districts in "financial watch" status, which requires the district to submit a plan to the state that details its prospects for financial recovery. The district on Dec. 6 submitted the plan, which asks for \$31.8 million in additional state funding to keep the district solvent.

"We understand the PIAA has rules and regulations that do not allow for the combination of programs in this configuration," Dahlstrand wrote about the possible consolidation request on Dec. 19 to Robert Lombardi, executive director of the PIAA. "However, given Erie's state-designated status, we feel this is a special circumstance which would not set precedent for any other district in Pennsylvania.

"We hope that PIAA might consider this proposal as a special circumstance in order to allow our students the opportunity to participate in activities that would be more competitive, more rewarding, and allow the district to realize a considerable financial savings."

Dahlstrand said the PIAA responded that the district needs to get some type of School Board approval before submitting the request. The School Board met Wednesday night in a nonvoting study session, where the school directors said Dahlstrand should proceed with the proposal to the PIAA.

One of the PIAA board members is Pete Iacino, of Hermitage. He also chairs the PIAA's District 10 Committee, which includes schools in Erie County. Iacino said he is aware of the Erie School District's financial crisis and has spoken to PIAA officials in general. He said he could not comment more until the Erie School District submits a detailed plan.

"It is up to the Erie School District to make some proposal for relief," Iacino said.

The District 10 Committee supported the Erie School District's co-op requests a year ago. The PIAA approved the Erie School District's co-op for girls sports rather than boys because of lower enrollment figures for girls. The PIAA

prohibits two or more schools with enrollments of more than 300 students each from merging sports programs. The rule is designed to prevent the creation of "super schools," Iacino has said.

The viability of its sports programs is a subject of the Erie School District's state-mandated plan. Without additional funding, according to the plan, the district would have to consider eliminating sports programs and other extracurricular activities to eliminate a projected deficit of \$10.1 million in 2017-18. And even if the district gets more state aid, district officials have said, the district will have to consider closing high schools in the future because of declining enrollment.

Those changes would alter how the Erie School District fields sports teams at the high school level. For now, Dahlstrand said, the district wants to pursue consolidation of sports as a way to save money and improve the athletic programs in the near term.

"Even if we get the money," he said, "we must taper down."

Ed Palattella can be reached at 870-1813 or by email. Follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/ETNpalattella.