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[With latest proposal, spotlight shines again on IHSAA class system](#)

[Colin Likas](#) | Apr 29, 2014 | [0 comments](#)

By Colin Likas | BUTLER UNIVERSITY | Photos and videos by Colin Likas, photos from IHSAA.org



The boys' basketball teams from Portage High School and Michigan City High School participate in a sectional game on April 1. Michigan City won the game. *(Photo by Colin Likas)*

Indiana high school basketball—a [viewing pastime](#) for so many on Friday nights in the winter months—could soon experience a major change.

The Indiana Basketball Coaches Association has presented a proposal that would change the class system in boys' basketball. The group is in favor of a three-class system, opposing the four-class hierarchy that has been in place for 14 years.

Each of the three classes would have two divisions within them. Winners of sectional tournaments—the first round of the postseason—in each class's two divisions would then be pitted against each other in the regional round and beyond.

"I think there's some good things to the proposal, but I think there's some real questions about the proposal as well," said Bobby Cox, Indiana High School Athletic Association commissioner. "I think it's going to be interesting, the response to some of those questions."

In early April, Cox reported that the proposal did not have majority support from the state's athletic directors and that it was supported by approximately 60 percent of boys' basketball coaches.

The IHSAA's executive committee will vote on this particular proposal on May 5.

This is not the first suggested change to the IHSAA's four-class system, and it likely will not be the last.

Regardless of the result, the state's class system in high school athletics seems to be in the spotlights more than student-athletes themselves.

History of the IHSAA and its class system

This four-class system—and the entirety of Indiana high school athletics—is governed by the IHSAA.

Founded in 1903, the organization has a simple mission: “To encourage and direct athletics in the high schools of the state.”

Fifteen state high schools chartered the organization. It now serves more than 400 state institutions.

“I've always been a real supporter of this association, (even) back when I was coaching and in school administration,” said Phil Gardner, an IHSAA assistant commissioner. “Like anything else, it doesn't always go in the direction you want it to or would like for it to. But what it stands for and what it represents, I'm very pleased with and proud of.”

Three groups exist within the IHSAA to help oversee everything from daily athletic concerns at a single school to statewide rule changes.

The executive staff, of which Gardner, Cox and seven others are part, provides daily service to member institutions and their administrators, coaches and student-athletes.

The board of directors helps to oversee rules and bylaws in state high school athletics. The board's 19 members represent each of the four athletic classes from different districts in the state.

“I think there's a lot of responsibility being on the board of directors. You have to be able to see the big picture,” said Geoff Penrod, board of directors president and Columbia City High School athletic director. “You just can't focus in on what is good for your particular school. Hopefully we're doing the best for all student-athletes.”

The third group, the executive committee, assists in directing state tournaments and meets, interpreting IHSAA bylaws and employing a commissioner. It also makes decisions on proposed rule and regulation changes—such as a change to the class system.

Members of the executive committee and board of directors are elected to their posts by state principals.

“(The IHSAA is) a principals' organization, and the input that's paramount to us is the opinion of those people that are directly serving the student-athletes,” said Phil Ford, executive committee chairman and Jay County High School principal. “We try to look and see what's best for our fans and what our principals are going to support.”

For many years, the state's principals—and fans—supported a single-class system for all high school sports. That system allowed for a single school to win a sport's state championship each season.

It led to memorable events like Milan High School's historic upset victory in the boys' basketball state championship game in 1954. Milan, a school of fewer than 200 students, toppled the team from a much larger Muncie Central High School.

In 1973, the first seeds of class system change were sown when the state moved to a three-class football tournament. All other sports remained in a single-class format for the time being.

Then, in 1995, the results of an 18-month study arrived—principals at 65 percent of IHSAA member schools wished to move to a multi-class format for all other team sports.

Team sports are classified as those in which an individual cannot win a state title alone. In Indiana, this encompasses football, basketball, baseball, softball, volleyball and soccer.

The late Eugene Cato, former IHSAA commissioner, put the study into place. Bob Gardner was commissioner when the study's results came forth.

“After my taking over, I made it clear I wasn't going to stop the study committee, nor was I going to try and sway their opinion,” said Bob Gardner, who served as IHSAA commissioner from November 1994 until July 2000.

Leveling the playing field was the primary reason for moving to a multi-class system, Cox said. More than 75 percent of the IHSAA's current membership—which amounts to more than 300 schools—has fewer than 1,000 students enrolled.

But the largest schools, such as Carmel High School—of which Cox is a former athletic director—exceed 4,000 students.

"It became evident to our membership that, as we continued to progress year after year, that the disparity between the largest schools in our state and the smallest schools in our state was growing," Cox said. "The reality of a school of 300 students defeating a school of 3,000 students in a similar sectional, regional or semi-state tournament was becoming less likely to occur."

More schools having the opportunity to produce championship teams was an additional benefit of the class system, said Geoff Penrod, IHSAA board of directors president.

"You're going to get more sectional champions, more regional champions, more semi-state and state champions," he said. "A lot of people say it is a lot fairer for schools with approximately the same type of enrollment to compete against each other instead of David and Goliath."

Robert Faulkens, IHSAA assistant commissioner, said ensuring more than a few schools could win a state title was one impetus for employing a class system.

"When you can create level playing fields and appropriate competition for students, I think it's a win-win for everyone," he said. "If you're a 4A kid and you win a state championship, it's great to win a state championship. If you're a 1A kid and you win a state championship, it's great to win a state championship. It's the same effort, it's the same sacrifice, and it's the same accomplishment."

The response to a potential multi-class system was mixed, especially as it would pertain to the boys' basketball tournament. At the time, only Indiana, Delaware and Kentucky still held single-class boys' basketball tournaments.

Priscilla Dillow, the first woman elected to the IHSAA board of directors, told The Indianapolis Star in 1995 that the proposal would keep the nostalgia surrounding the tournament while also giving smaller schools more chances to win a state title.

In the same Indianapolis Star article, Steve Witty, the current Indiana Basketball Coaches Association executive director, said he could not support a multi-class system because basketball is "a way of life in Indiana."

Phil Gardner, IHSAA assistant commissioner, was on the committee that studied a multi-class tournament. He was also on the IHSAA board of directors when an eventual multiple-class system proposal was voted in by a 12-5 margin.

"It was a big move, and it was very emotional, especially from people that did not want (the system and tradition) to change," Phil Gardner said. "Single class was unique across the country, and change like that is difficult."

Bob Gardner said the change defined his time as IHSAA commissioner.

"Even though I didn't have a vote in the process, for those who hate it, I'll always have the blame," he said. "And for those who think it was a good decision, I'll get all the credit. Neither of those are accurate."

At the beginning of the 1997-1998 school year, most of Indiana's high school team sports were contest in a multi-class format.

HISTORY OF THE INDIANA HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION CLASS SYSTEM

1903—The Indiana High School Athletic Association is founded by 15 charter schools with this mission: “To encourage and direct athletics in the high schools of the state.”

1973—Football is the first team sport to move to a class system, employing a three-class template.

1983—Football adds a fourth class.

1985—Football adds a fifth class.

1994—Bob Gardner replaces Eugene Cato as IHSAA commissioner

1995—The results of an 18-month study put into place by Cato come in: Principals at 65 percent of IHSAA member schools wish to move to a multi-class format in basketball, baseball, volleyball and softball.

1997—Basketball, baseball and volleyball employ a four-class system, while softball utilizes a three-class system. Softball will move to four classes in 2003.

2000—Blake Ress replaces Bob Gardner as IHSAA commissioner. Ress immediately faces discussion about classifying wrestling, but this ultimately leads to no action.

2007—A proposal is put forth by the Indiana Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association to move basketball, baseball, volleyball and softball to three classes. The proposal is ultimately turned down in 2009.

2011—Soccer moves to a two-class system, ending a holdout that resulted from not enough schools having soccer programs.

2012—The IHSAA executive committee approves a sixth class in football and the tournament success factor for all classed sports. The tournament success factor pushes teams with a certain level of postseason success up one class for at least two seasons.

2012—Indiana Senator Mike Delph introduces legislation to make the boys’ basketball tournament a single-class affair once again. He drops the bill after the IHSAA agrees to explore the topic. Ultimately, the idea is dropped.

2014—The Indiana Basketball Coaches Association produces a proposal that would make boys’ basketball a three-class sport. The proposal is up for IHSAA executive committee vote on May 5.

Only soccer was held out—until the 2011-2012 academic year—because the number of schools with soccer programs was initially too small to classify the sport.

While support for the class system was great among high school principals during the initial study, the concept drew concern and scorn once enforced.

Mark Gould, former Lowell High School principal, told the Indianapolis Star in 1996 that he was unsure how his school of 851 students competing against schools with more than 2,000 was fair.

At the time, Lowell was given 4A classification, while Wawasee High School—which also had 851 students—achieved status as the largest 3A school.

In the class system’s first years, the 4A class accommodated 95 schools. The three lower classes held 96 institutions.

Seccina Memorial High School was placed in a similar situation. Its enrollment of 462 qualified it to be the smallest school in class 3A. North Montgomery High School, with three fewer students, earned the top spot in class 2A.

“I’d be lying if I didn’t say I wish we were at the top of the 2A class,” then-Scecina principal Steven Papesh told the Indianapolis Star in 1996. “Looking at the way it was done in terms of enrollment, it was inevitable that there would be situations like the one we are in. But the way it was done was the most equitable way it could have been accomplished.”

Faulkens, IHSAA assistant commissioner, was a coach at Ben Davis High School when classification took effect. Ben Davis was and still is the state’s largest high school.

“The feeling was that the larger schools were just going to be able to dominate the tournament from here on out. Being from a larger school, I didn’t think that was such a bad idea,” he said. “Initially, I was not a proponent of the class system.”

Another immediate concern was loss of traditional rivalries as a result of classification. Some schools that were bitter rivals for many years prior to the class system were placed in different classes.

Penrod, IHSAA board of directors president and Columbia City High School athletic director, said his school has this issue.

“Every time we’ve gone through reclassification, we’ve changed classes, because we’re right on the bubble between 3A and 4A,” Penrod said. “It’s difficult to create natural rivals.”

While IHSAA constituents both praised and expressed concern for classification, the system continued on. Bob Gardner stepped down as the organization’s commissioner in July 2000.

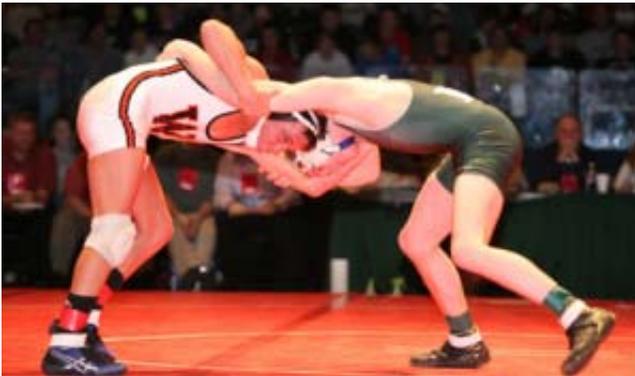
Blake Ress stepped into the position and oversaw a period of stability mixed with a desire for change to the class system.

Adjusting and adjusting to the class system

Proposed changes to IHSAA rules and regulations—including the class system—can be created by a number of parties and individuals. Coaches associations, athletic administrators, principals and the IHSAA commissioner himself can suggest ideas for implementation.

Sandy Searcy, IHSAA assistant commissioner, said the organization’s executive committee sees approximately 20 to 30 proposals per year from these groups.

“It’s incumbent upon us to hear from our constituents because they’re the recipients of these rules—specifically the student-athletes, but also the principals, athletic directors and coaches,” she said. “They make up our association. It is not just a group of five or six people in a little dark room making these decisions.”



Discussion about classifying Indiana high school wrestling in the early-2000s ultimately came to pass without change. (*Screenshot from IHSAA.org*)

The first class system challenge Ress faced as commissioner came from coaches and involved a sport that had not been classified in 1997—wrestling.

In Ress’ first year as commissioner, the Indiana Wrestling Coaches Association opened talks about a multi-class state wrestling tournament. At the time, both individual and team state tournaments existed, and a multi-class system would have applied to both.

At the time, Ress called the idea “intriguing.” Prior to accepting the commissioner role, Ress was an assistant commissioner in charge of overseeing the state wrestling tournaments.

Ultimately, the concept never passed, and the team state tournament was abolished in 2012.

“I don’t think there is much interest in our principals to have kids compete for a state championship based on class or school size when it’s a one-on-one state championship and everything is fair,” said Faulkens, who oversees wrestling as assistant commissioner. “The dynamics of class come in when you have more kids available for more spots.”

Legitimate discussion about altering the class system did not gain steam again until 2007.

The Indiana Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association, which consists of high school athletic directors from

throughout the state, generated a proposal to move boys' and girls' basketball, volleyball, baseball and softball from a four-class system to one of three classes.

The initial proposal outlined nine reasons behind the idea. The leading three points were equity at the sectional level—created by eliminating byes and balancing tournament brackets—reducing travel and creating more champions at the sectional and regional levels.

The IHSAA requested that the IIAAA distribute a survey to all state athletic directors as an evaluation of the class system at that time. According to the survey, which was distributed in August 2007, no true evaluation of the class system had taken place up to that point.

While the class system's creation was spurred by evening out the playing field in high school sports, the survey's results showed athletic directors in smaller high schools were not satisfied with the system.

Of 83 class 1A athletic directors who responded, 54 said they were dissatisfied with the class system. Likewise, 43 percent of class 2A athletic administrators disapproved of the system.

The survey also showed 89 percent of class 4A administrators were satisfied with the system.

"An organization the size that (the IHSAA is), everybody doesn't get what they want," said Phil Ford, principal of class 4A Jay County High School. "That doesn't mean they don't get listened to.

"It is responsible for us to evaluate the system and look for ways to make the tournaments better. If you stand still, then you're going to go backwards."

Ultimately, the proposal was turned down in 2009.

But with a new decade the following year came even more discussion about change to the class system, as well as actual changes and a new IHSAA commissioner to oversee them.

Bobby Cox was named commissioner in February 2011, preceding a flurry of activity in Indiana high school sports.

Both boys' and girls' soccer joined the ranks of classified sports by moving to a two-class system for the 2011-2012 season. This came after enough schools finally had teams to justify such a move.

In 2012, multiple changes occurred, and a study began following the actions of an Indiana senator.



Football went from a five-class system, which had been in place since 1985, to a six-class system for the 2013 season. (Screenshot from IHSAA.org)

In June of that year, the IHSAA executive committee voted 13-5 in favor of a sixth class for football. The sport had operated with five classes since 1985.

Faulkens, who also oversees football as an IHSAA assistant commissioner, said a key reason for shifting to six classes was a small number of institutions winning state championships in the largest class.

"When you have a group of 64 schools, and only 25-30 of them are winning a state championship, that was the impetus for making that more fair," he said. "You go from 5,000 kids in a school to 2,000 kids in a school. That is a huge different between those schools."

Faulkens said the 2013 state football tournament—the first to feature six classes—hinted to a bright future for the sport.

"There is a new energy about the football tournament for the simple reason there is more opportunities for schools to win," he

said. "In this past football tournament, we had several of schools that hadn't had that opportunity—it was their first trip—and that's the kind of excitement you hope to create when you change your tournament format."

The IHSAA executive committee also approved the tournament success factor in June 2012. This applies to all classified sports.

Under the factor, teams earn points for winning sectional (one point), regional (two), semi-state (three) and state championships (four). A team can earn up to four points in a single academic year.

If that team earns six points over the course of two seasons, it will compete in the next-highest class. Only that team moves up in class level, while the school's other teams remain in the lower class.



A few volleyball teams were affected by the tournament success rule prior to the 2013-2014 academic year. (Screenshot from IHSAA.org)

In volleyball, teams from Yorktown High School, Indianapolis Bishop Chatard High School and Wapahani High School are all a class higher than their schools' other teams due to the success factor.

The former two teams moved to 4A with enrollments of less than 800. The highest enrollment in 3A is 1,108.

Wapahani's enrollment of 356 is nearly 200 students larger than the largest school in class 2A, the class it was promoted from.

This situation also exists in soccer, where the girls' teams at Mishawaka Marian High School and Providence High School and boys' team at Fort Wayne Canterbury High School moved from 1A to 2A this season.

In football, two schools were moved from class 1A to 2A, one team was moved from 3A to 4A, and another was moved from 4A to 5A.

Three schools were moved up one class in girls' basketball as well.

Faulkens said the logic behind enforcing this rule revolves around allowing more schools the opportunity to win a state championship.

"The perception is schools and kids have a better chance to be successful, when those schools that consistently win are moved to what some people think is an appropriate placement in the tournament," he said.

Faulkens said the IHSAA has heard concerns about the success factor from teams and schools affected. Some, he said, argue they are being punished for having a strong group of student-athletes come through the school.

However, not all institutions are worried about the factor.

The Indianapolis Cathedral High School football team moved from 4A to 5A after winning three consecutive state championships in the lower class. The squad took home the 5A crown in 2013.



The Fort Wayne Canterbury girls' basketball team won five class 1A state titles between 2008 and 2013. The team moved to class 2A this season due to the tournament success factor and finished runner-up. (Screenshot from IHSAA.org)

In women's basketball, Evansville Mater Dei High School and Fort Wayne Canterbury High School finished runner-up in their respective state tournaments in the same year as they were moved up one class.

"What the success factor has done has proved the point that those schools that are very good can compete in any level of the tournament," Faulkens said. "It's not a hindrance, it's not a punishment. It's an appropriate level of placement, from what we can see."

A third class system development in 2012 resulted from a proposal by Indiana Senator Mike Delph.

Delph introduced legislation that year that would have required a return to single-class basketball. He dropped the bill after Cox and the IHSAA committed to exploring the idea.

"While there was interest in it, there was not any significant interest," said Phil Gardner, an IHSAA assistant commissioner who oversees boys' basketball. "I say this with total respect: There are old timers that believe it should be (one class). I don't think the reality of changing it back is very solid."

Cox said the emotion and history associated with the single-class basketball tournament are generally the most prominent reasons for suggestions to return to one class.

"(People say) that we've lost our nostalgia and our uniqueness," he said. "Our tradition is rich and memorable, and we're proud of our heritage, but times change. Today, I look at the excitement and unity that multiple-class sports have been able to bring to the smaller communities in this state."

A change in the boys' basketball tournament gained no further momentum until earlier this year, when the Indiana Basketball Coaches Association presented a proposal to alter the sport.

The class system today and beyond

The coaches association's three-class proposal is an attempt to deal with travel and game attendance concerns, as well as unbalanced sectional brackets, association director Steve Witty told the Indianapolis Star.

In 2012, the sport's state finals welcomed fewer than 23,000 fans, the lowest figure in history. The entire tournament saw about 385,000 fans, the fewest since the advent of class basketball.

Each of the three classes would contain two divisions, which would remain separate through the sectional round. The sports would gain localized regionals, reduced travel and increased opportunities for underdogs if the proposal passes, according to the coaches association.



Fans take in a boys' basketball sectional game between Chesterton High School and LaPorte High School on April 1. (Photo by Colin Likas)

Travel is a key complaint of those opposed to the class system, in all sports.

Searcy, IHSAA assistant commissioner, said travel concerns are something that is "assumed" now, but that this does not mean they are universally accepted.

"With class sports, that does come with increased travel for schools competing at the sectional level," she said. "And that was a known factor. (With) more classes (there are) more expenses (and) more travel, and those were kind of the sacrifices to provide a level playing field."

Searcy, who oversees volleyball and softball, said this concern is even greater for teams in the regional round of those two sports. Regional games are conducted on Tuesday nights in both volleyball and softball.

"In some cases, there is quite a lot of travel involved on a school night," she said. "We reduce that as much as possible, but in some cases it's there. It's particularly there in Southern Indiana, because schools in a particular class may be situated geographically apart, and it requires that travel time."

Regarding travel in the boys' basketball proposal, Cox said the alignment of schools in some sectionals could be a deciding factor in the proposal's passage.

He cited the possibility of Center Grove High School and Jeffersonville High School—which are approximately one-and-a-half hours apart—being in the same sectional as one concern.

"That's a long way to go for a basketball game on Friday nights," he said. "In some sectionals, that's going to work out just great. But on the other side of it, there are going to be some that are going to be really bad."

No matter how many other proposals follow the currently active one for boys' basketball, IHSAA constituents acknowledged some benefits the class system has brought to high school athletics.

Searcy said the system's integration correlates with a rise in popularity of female high school sports, especially in Southern Indiana.

"Particularly, the revenues and attendance at the sectional, regional and semi-state levels have been fantastic," she said. "Enthusiasm for girls' sports has grown tremendously."

While some who remember single-class athletics wish to return to that format, Phil Ford said current student-athletes are not concerned with that idea.

"Kids today don't really care whether they're single class or multiclass. The kids that have a chance to make a championship run in a state tournament, and it's a great experience for them," said Ford, Jay County principal. "I don't see that multi-class sports somehow dampen leadership or cause kids to settle for less."

Cox used the inclusion of schools from some smaller Indiana communities in this year's boys' basketball state tournament to outline the even playing field class sports aim to achieve.

"When those folks from Barr Reeve and Montgomery come to Bankers Life Fieldhouse, or those folks from Westview or Topeka—in all likelihood, (that) was something that was not going to happen for those schools in the old system," he said. "When you look at the opportunity to bring communities together to support education-based athletics and the basketball teams of those schools in a state championship environment, you can't replace that."

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- indiana high school athletic association

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