

After years of attempts, Florida Legislature approves changes to high school athletics

HIGHLIGHTS

The policy changes are included in a sweeping “school choice” bill the Legislature approved

Gov. Rick Scott has until April 14 to act on it

The proposed law also allows for open enrollment affecting all public school students



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TALLAHASSEE — The landscape of Florida high school athletics is poised to change starting next school year, but just how drastically remains to be seen.

The “school choice” legislation that lawmakers passed last month — and that awaits Republican Gov. Rick Scott’s signature — includes provisions long sought by the Republican-led Legislature to ensure that student-athletes have more freedom to play sports when switching schools.

Thanks to compromise during the legislative session, somewhat diminished are the fears from coaches and athletic directors, who worried the policy changes could unleash a torrent of transfers and create a system of free agency for high school athletes.

Lawmakers and some athletics officials agree the proposed law includes better safeguards to deter that from happening, although uncertainty still lingers over how the legislation will be implemented.

“We worked hard on this, as far as going back and forth on negotiations. At the end of the day, it was really about getting a fair outcome,” said Rep. Manny Diaz Jr., R-Hialeah, who sponsored the athletics proposal in the House.

Scott has until April 14 to act on HB 7029, which deals with a slew of “school choice” initiatives, as well as changes to college and university funding. The policies related to high school athletics include:

- Allowing student-athletes to be “immediately” eligible when transferring schools;

- Imposing penalties on school district employees who recruit student-athletes;
- Requiring districts to establish policies for students' eligibility.

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CERTAINLY YOU DON'T WANT A KID ATTENDING A SCHOOL, PLAYING A SPORT, AND THEN CHANGING SCHOOLS; THAT'S NOT IN THE SPIRIT OF HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS.

Corey Sobers, Florida High School Athletic Association assistant director

A related, but more broad, provision of the bill also allows for open enrollment at public schools statewide. That would allow any student to attend any school in the state, so long as there is space available for them.

If Scott signs the bill, the high school athletics provisions would take effect July 1. The open-enrollment aspect — which would allow students to attend schools across district lines — wouldn't take effect until the 2017-18 school year.

Some county athletic directors said they haven't formed final opinions on the legislation yet, because they want to be sure of what's all included in the 160-page bill and they said they're looking to the Florida High School Athletic Association — the state's governing body — for guidance.

“There's been so much talk back and forth that I certainly want to make sure that I see what it says first,” said Nick Grasso, Pinellas County's athletics director.

Among those who have reviewed it, there's disagreement over whether the fears of free agency are still viable.

“There's not much change that's occurring from the present,” said Damian Huttenhoff, director of the Broward County Athletic Association. “Students have the right, right now, to change schools every year. ... The concern is if students can change after the sports season has started.”

In earlier versions of the legislation, that possibility was very real. But in the final proposed law, there's a fail-safe to prevent student-athletes from jumping from school to school if they're unsatisfied.

It bars students from participating in a sport if they've already participated in that same sport during the school year — unless they've transferred schools for four limited reasons, such as if their parent is active-duty military who moved because of work orders.

“Those pieces were very important from our perspective,” said Corey Sobers, assistant director of athletics for the FHSAA.

“Certainly you don't want a kid attending a school, playing a sport, and then changing schools; that's not in the spirit of high school athletics,” Sobers said.

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AS LONG AS YOU CAN GET A TRANSFER, THERE'S STILL GOING TO BE FREE AGENCY.

Cheryl Golden, executive secretary of the Greater Miami Athletic Conference

But other athletic officials say there's plenty still to worry about.

“As long as you can get a transfer, there's still going to be free agency,” said Cheryl Golden, executive secretary of the Greater Miami Athletic Conference. “The implications are vast.”

For instance, Golden said she fears student-athletes who transfer frequently might lose track of their academic progress and jeopardize their high school graduation, or that average athletes could be squeezed out from playing in their neighborhood schools by star players looking to shine at top-tier programs.

Lawmakers and FHSAA officials say the responsibility will rest with coaches and school leaders to ensure that student-athletes — or by extension, their parents or school boosters and volunteers — aren't gaming the system.

The proposed law includes harsh penalties for school or district officials who recruit student-athletes, starting with a \$5,000 fine for a first offense up to the loss of an educator's license for three years for a third offense.

“In South Florida, in particular, everybody knows there's stuff that goes on,” Diaz said. “Coaches, athletic directors and principals have to be vigilant — that if they see something like that, that they don't let it go on.”

Both Diaz and Sen. Kelli Stargel, R-Lakeland, said they're pleased with the final language after years of fighting to get the changes through the Legislature.

“I am happy with where we are,” Stargel said. “This will go a long way with solving the concerns that I had, that kids should play sports as long as they’re not being recruited.”

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