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Updated: GHSA's Phillips offers to retire amid legislative pressure



Todd Holcomb

Updated February 28, 2017 Filed in [ajc-sports.ajc](#), [Cobb County](#), [Gwinnett County](#), [Latest News](#).

Georgia High School Association executive director Gary Phillips has agreed to retire at the end of the 2016-17 school year if the GHSA honors his contract through 2018.



The GHSA board of trustees voted 5-3 on Monday to bring that question to the 66-member executive committee next Monday. The trustees hope that Phillips' retirement will hold off ominous bills in the Georgia legislature.

[House Bill 415](#) and [Senate Bill 203](#), which are identical, propose to [replace the GHSA with a new statewide governing body](#) that would operate under the state board of education.

GHSA assistant executive director Jay Russell testified Monday to the House Education Committee.

"Mr. Phillips has decided to retire at the end of this school year, so we will be looking for a new executive director," Russell said. "And I don't know if that will influence the vote at all, but I wanted you to have this information."

It didn't influence the vote, as the house bill is out of committee, but it might prevent it from going further.

Russell went on to say that Phillips would retire "just because he thinks it's the right thing to do."

Rep. John Meadows, R-Calhoun, chairman of the House Rules Committee, and the one who is targeting GHSA with legislation, agreed with Russell's sentiment.

"Gary Phillips has done what he thought was best for this organization since he got there. ... and I guess that he's doing this because he thinks it might be in the best interest of this organization," Meadows said. "So don't throw too many rocks at him."

But Meadows also said he gets more complaints about the GHSA – from schools, referees, coaches and parents – than about everything else put together, "and basically I'm sick of it." He added, "I don't think they know what their job is."

Russell had other remarks about the GHSA in general.

"Yeah, we have problems," he acknowledged. "We're not a perfect organization, but we try to do the right thing."

Russell said that communication isn't always what it needs to be. He answered to the perception, expressed during the hearing, that the association is filthy rich and stingy and secretive about its money.

The GHSA puts its audit on its website, although it is not sent to the state. The GHSA spends about \$5 million a year and keeps the same in reserves, which Russell said is where the "perception of the overage" comes from.

Phillips declined to discuss Monday's events but did comment on the bills on Friday.

"Obviously we don't see the need in all this," Phillips said. "We understand we're not perfect and understand that there are some controversies within the body itself and rules that are made. ... There's always going to be some controversy here and there. That's the way high school athletics unfortunately have evolved."

GHSA board member Tommy Stringer of Loganville, who voted to support Phillips, said other board members expressed no real personal dissatisfaction with Phillips but said his removal would ensure the GHSA's existence and independence. Stringer said his own vote rejected that concern.

"I don't think the Georgia Legislature has any business dealing in Georgia High School Association affairs," Stringer said.

Those voting to recommend that Phillips resign were board president Glenn White, Model High principal in Rome; Gary Long, Mill Creek High athletics director in Gwinnett County; Don Corr of Cherokee County schools; Jesse Crews of Charlton County High and Benjy Rogers, Bleckley County athletics director in Cochran.

Voting against were Stringer; Jim Finch, Mary Persons High principal in Forsyth; and Joe Lancaster of Jackson County. Vice president Lisa Moore Williams of Mableton and at-large trustee Wes Taylor of Valdosta did not attend.

The 10-member board includes seven representatives from each GHSA classification, a president, a vice-president and an at-large member.

Many of the GHSA's decisions during Phillips' tenure have been controversial, which is not unusual for any executive director.

Buford and especially Jefferson were unhappy at the process and appeals procedures that led to those city schools being placed in higher classifications this academic year while most other city schools were unaffected.

Phillips' decision to enforce the GHSA's bylaws and keep Wheeler's boys basketball from participating in a post-season tournament in New York two years ago also caused a public outcry. Phillips changed course and gave special permission once legal action was threatened.

The legislature got involved in the fall of 2015, when the GHSA upheld the disqualification of a third-place finisher at the 2015 state cross-country meet for ignoring a warning and wearing a head band that contained a Bible verse. Any message, and not the verse per se, violated national federation rules.

The GHSA then got a black eye during the March 2016 state basketball finals when it was discovered that the baskets at the Macon Coliseum had been positioned incorrectly, about a foot too close to the baseline. Phillips elected to play on and not correct the mistake mid-event, which would've caused games to be delayed or postponed.

Phillips is only the fifth GHSA executive director since 1946, but he would be the first to be forced out. Phillips succeeded Ralph Swearngin, who served from 2001 to 2014.

Phillips assumed the directorship on July 1, 2014. His contract was renewed a year later through 2017-18.

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sportee

11 hours ago

GHSA has no checks and balances when it comes to appealing their decisions. It is incredibly frustrating. The main goal of the organization seems to be following the rules to avoid blowback. There is very little consideration given to how these decisions affect the kids. I doubt Phillips was any worse than the other guys, but they have lost sight of the point of the game. It's about the kids.

<http://www.ajc.com/news/local/dekalb-swim-team-saddened-miss-championship-after-coach-error/DBQIpMUK9B70O4nGojx2ML/>

Like Reply



MajorDowning

12 hours ago

Not to mention it appears the State Basketball Finals will NOT be televised on GPB. With \$5M in reserves GHSA can pay to have that done easily.

I hope it is put in the hands of the state DOE at least it'll have teeth.

Like Reply



JM64

20 hours ago

The legislation allowing immediate transfers without a bona fide move is ridiculous and something that will hurt competition in all sports.

1 Like Reply



FauxNewsAJC

17 hours ago

@JM64 there will be a new rule/law about student-athletes "moving" that should be announced once all this gets done. Its been called the "50 mile rule." But, we'll see what they actually implement. A helluva lot better than having Greg Phillips, AD at Berkmar, just fudge addresses every year.

Like Reply

JM64

17 hours ago



@FauxNewsAJC @JM64 Well we will see, but HB 415 states that at the beginning of every school year the student determines eligibility for that year by enrolling in the school of their choice.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



FauxNewsAJC

21 hours ago

Worst run organization in all of Georgia. The GHSA cares about the Corky Kell Classic and beyond that, they don't give a damn. Letting kids transfer all over and doing nothing. AD's falsifying addresses (Greg Phillips/Berkmar) and getting called out by the Gwinnett county AD and again, nothing done. Baseball playing their state Championship after kids graduate high school because we are too dumb to back up football and basketball seasons. Too afraid of Johnny's mommy taking us to court has triggered this situation. The state needs to take over the GHSA and do away with the crud of an organization. The GHSA let themselves get too old and never replaced with fresh, young blood. The old coots ruined it.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



Charles C Jr Hall

1 day ago

I SUPPORT WHATEVER WOULD GIVE US A SANE STATE BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT AGAIN..THE PRIVATE SCHOOLS ISSUE IS STILL NOT SOLVED..TO PROVE THAT STUDY THE HISTORY

OF THE FITZGERALD FOOTBALL PLAYOFF HISTORY OVER THE LAST 10 YEARS..LOSSES TO EITHER THE PRIVATE SCHOOLS OR BUFORD OR JEFFERSON..THE TRANSFER SITUATIONS ARE REDICULOUS..THIS YEARS BASKETBALL FINALS ARE OUT OF REACH TO THE PEOPLE OF SOUTH GEORGIA...THE PRESENT ORGANIZATION SMELLS BAD..ANYTIME THEY GET A LEGISLATIVE THREAT THEY ARE READY TO GET RIGHT...HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS BELONG TO THE PEOPLE OF GEORGIA AND NOT SOME BIG HEADED BERAUCRACY

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



Basketball Dad

1 day ago

Great news,

Phillips and the GHSA have lost their way. It wasn't about the kids anymore, it was about power and control, vindictive politics and "good ole boys" that did what they wanted at the expense of the kids. The final straw should have been the debacle in Macon during the 2016 championship games, why did it take this long to see that he thought he was above the law? Oh yeah, Isaac Kellum (McIntosh 2016), God don't like ugly.

Charles Kellum

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



khd713

1 day ago

The Republicans in our Legislature can't get enough government when it comes to education. They want the state to take over failing schools, they provide back-door vouchers in the form of tax credits for private school scholarships, and now they want the state to take over GHSA. They are a bunch of power-hungry RINOs led by Earl Ehrhart, and they don't know the first thing about small government conservatism.

1 [Like](#) [Reply](#)



Smellvin Therat

1 day ago

Well, that's one area that they have in common with the Democrats: They both crave power.

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



UnbiasedObserver

1 day ago

How about disband the GHSA totally! There a Do Nothing organization...

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



khd713

1 day ago

@UnbiasedObserver Pretty ignorant comment. GHSA actually does a heck of a lot. Many people who follow high school athletics, as well as the legislators leading this effort, would argue that they do too much.

1 Like Reply



UnbiasedObserver

1 day ago

@khd713 @UnbiasedObserver Yeah, sure they do, like take \$\$\$ from their "member schools". I know everything they claim to do. Its a joke organization and everyone knows it.

1 Like Reply



FauxNewsAJC

17 hours ago

@khd713 @UnbiasedObserver agreed. Worked in high school athletics for 19 years and the GHSA is the worst organization to run athletics ever assembled. Please do away with the entire outfit and fire them all.

Like Reply



TruthReallyHurts

1 day ago

But, but, but ... I thought Republicans were for less government? They are the most hypocritical people on the planet. "Government can't get anything right except when something doesn't go our way!" Coach Phillips is a good man. Leave him alone. Perhaps one of his old high school players, everyone's favorite black Republican, Herschel Walker, can bail him out.

Like Reply



Smellvin Therat

1 day ago

And the Democrats are different? Get your head out your backside and acknowledge they are BOTH cut from the same cloth. They are power-hungry craven politicians.

Like Reply



TruthReallyHurts

1 day ago

@Smellvin Therat Nonsense. I'm not a member of either party, though I lean Democrat. Still, name an instance in which Democrats are as duplicitous as Republicans? I'll wait.

Like Reply



TonyHut

19 hours ago

@TruthReallyHurts @Smellvin Therat Not enough time in the day to refute your ridiculous post.

Like Reply



TrumpFan#1

1 day ago

Interesting.

Like Reply



Salsa Dr.

1 day ago

You could not add enough zeros to my check to get me to take that job. Truly thankless.

1 Like Reply



Manman

1 day ago

Only "leaders" with zero vision or actual leadership cling to regulations and bylaws as if they are set in stone. Good riddance.

1 Like Reply



HCCynic

1 day ago

@Manman Your observation is correct, and it holds true for "leaders" in organizations beyond athletics and education

Like Reply

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