

Separate high school playoffs get legislative look

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Two state representatives are taking on the issue, which Millcreek schools Superintendent Bill Hall has pushed in Erie County.

The push for separate playoffs for high school sports in Pennsylvania has become more than a sideline issue in Harrisburg.

Two state representatives have taken an interest in changing the playoff structure, an effort whose advocates include Millcreek Township School District Superintendent Bill Hall.

And in perhaps another sign that the issue has truly entered the realm of state politics, Hall and his colleagues have opted to work with one representative over another.

They said they were surprised when one of the representatives, [Scott Conklin](#), a Democrat from Centre County, held a news conference in State College earlier this month to [announce](#) that he is proposing legislation to create separate playoffs. Under the changes, boundary schools, or traditional public schools, would no longer play for championships against non-boundary schools, or private and charter schools.

The Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association holds combined playoffs for boundary and non-boundary schools under a 1972 state law that allowed private and parochial schools to become members of

the PIAA. The PIAA maintains that separate playoffs would violate the 1972 law, which has led to a focus on possible legislative changes.

Hall said he and his group, called the Pennsylvania Athletics Equity Committee, are working on playoff reforms with state Rep. Aaron [Bernstine](#), a Republican from Ellwood City. His district includes parts of Butler County and parts of Lawrence County, including New Castle, where the playoff issue has also gained supporters.

On Tuesday, Hall and other members of the equity committee met in Harrisburg with Bernstine and the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference "to continue working toward a compromise regarding PIAA playoff structure," according to a joint statement from Bernstine, the equity committee and the Catholic conference.

"Public and private school advocates" are working with Bernstine to address "the complexities surrounding these issues," according to the statement. "Any legislative effort will require a thorough and open dialogue to continue."

Latest proposal

Hall and other public school superintendents for about a [year](#) have pushed for separate playoffs. They argue that the current system is unfair because boundary schools can only draw students from within the boundaries of a public school district and private schools can draw students statewide and from out of state.

Private schools and others have countered that students from one school district can pay tuition to attend another school district and play sports, though Hall and other local school officials said that

practice does not occur in Erie County.

Conklin held his news conference on Feb. 14 with members of the Pennsylvania Scholastic Football Coaches Association, which had a clinic in State College. He said his proposal would create more fairness among playoffs and would eliminate concerns that separate playoffs would create legal problems for the PIAA.

“We pass this piece of legislation, you don’t have to face litigation,” Conklin said in his announcement. “You’ll be able to do this. It makes it fair.”

Conklin that day also issued a co-sponsorship [memo](#) seeking support for a bill that would promote “safe and fair high school competitions.” His proposed [legislation](#) would mandate that the PIAA establish “separate playoff systems and championships for athletics for public schools and private schools.”

In an interview, Conklin said he is still seeking co-sponsors before he formally introduces the bill. He said the legislation would apply to all sports, and that his main concerns are making competition fairer in the playoffs, where proponents of separate playoffs say non-boundary schools have an advantage because of the wider pool of potential players.

Conklin said his legislation would not affect how boundary and non-boundary schools operate their athletic programs. The schools could also continue to play one another during the regular season, which would be the case with the proposal from Hall’s group.

“In no way does this bill change how anyone does business — how

they bring in students, the facilities, nothing," Conklin said. "This is not going after anyone." The purpose of the proposal, he said, is for each team to "play in the playoffs in which they are best situated to be in."

Conklin said he has been considering the playoff issue for about two years, and that he is ready to work with other groups, such as Hall's, to develop legislation.

"It is not like it is put in stone," Conklin said. "I was thrilled to hear that other people are working on this."

The PIAA has no comment on Conklin's proposal because it still needs cosponsors and has yet to be introduced as a bill, said Melissa Mertz, the PIAA's associate executive director.

Other efforts

Hall's group, the Pennsylvania Athletics Equity Committee, has focused on separate playoffs for football and basketball. The group in a statement did not explain why it is not working with Conklin, but the group said its members will continue to work with Bernstine on a possible compromise.

"We certainly appreciate Rep. Conklin's support of our quest for separate playoffs, but his impromptu news conference at State College caught us by surprise," the committee said. Hall declined to comment beyond the statement.

As the committee has pressed for changes, the PIAA has tightened rules to guard against transfers for athletic intent. Transfers of star football players from Millcreek's McDowell High School to arch-rival

Cathedral Preparatory School preceded the initiative from Hall and others on separate playoffs for football and basketball. The PIAA District 10 Committee, which covers northwestern Pennsylvania, approved the transfers.

The new PIAA rules include a requirement that any student-athlete who transfers to a new school after ninth grade must sit out the playoffs at the new school for a year. The first test for that rule locally is expected to involve the case of Danny Blue, a star football player and a junior at Erie High who [transferred](#) to McDowell in January.

Hall has said he has no problem with that transfer because Blue's family moved to Millcreek, but the new rules still require that Blue get a waiver from the District 10 Committee to be eligible for the playoffs his senior year. The Erie School District, which could challenge Blue's athletic eligibility, has said it is reviewing the case.

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

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