

How the head of Maine's high school sports helped usher in a new era despite declining enrollments



Pete Warner | BDN

Dick Durost will spend his final days as executive director of the Maine Principals' Association in one of the places that his career took root — Indianapolis, Indiana.

Durost, who on Sunday concludes his 18-year MPA career, will attend the 100th National Federation of State High School Associations summer meeting.

The 70-year-old Durost capped a four-year stint on the NFHS board of directors as its president in 2000 when the association moved from Kansas City to Indianapolis.

"It kind of puts a bow on my career knowing I was there the year they made that move," he said.

On April 1, 2001, the Aroostook County native and veteran school administrator in Easton and Presque Isle was named to replace Richard W. Tyler as the head of Maine's governing body for interscholastic sports. In that position, Durost has overseen an ever-changing high school sports landscape.

"That [NFHS] experience really gave me an opportunity to see high school athletics and activities at the national level," Durost said.

His biggest initial adjustment involved the other focus of his job, the association's professional division.

"We were relatively inactive in the Legislature around education legislation prior to Dick Tyler's retirement," Durost said. "That was a major additional responsibility given to me when I came to work here, to the point that when the Legislature is in session that's probably a good 75 percent of my responsibility."

But the most public view of Durost and the MPA has been on the interscholastic side.

New sports such as girls ice hockey, girls wrestling and unified basketball have been added. Tournament sites have changed, and a cooperative team policy was adopted that allowed multiple schools to

unite in fielding teams to create more opportunities for athletes at smaller schools previously unable to field teams on their own.

High school basketball now consists of five classes, while football has four, including [an eight-player division being introduced this fall](#), in an effort to address declining enrollments.

"I think that particularly in the last five or 10 years as a staff and as committees we've really looked at making changes when change needs to be made," Durost said.

He is quick to point out that policies governing Maine interscholastic sports are not created or changed at the central office in Augusta. Instead, they emerge from the grassroots committee work of MPA members around the state and are subject to approval by the association's full membership.

"I know there are members of the public who think the MPA staff sits here and makes up policy and gives interpretations, but whenever we can we try to make sure people know we're working for those roughly 150 high schools and their principals with the support and cooperation of athletic administrators," Durost said.

The key to the process, he said, is maintaining consistency.

"We're working with those policies on a daily basis where, for a principal or an AD [athletic director], something may only pop up on their radar screen once every two or three years when they have an issue internally."

MPA policies occasionally are challenged publicly. Durost said the MPA

has been taken to court three or four times and has been challenged before the Maine Human Rights Commission. It has prevailed in all instances.

"The reason we have been [successful] was because our member schools put in good, solid policy and then we are consistent in how we implement and interpret those policies," Durost said.

"That has gone a long way toward treating the largest number of kids that we can in the most positive way."

One lingering area of concern for Durost is the trend among some student-athletes toward specializing in a single sport rather than participating in different sports throughout the school year.

"There's maybe some positive impact for that top one-tenth of 1 percent," Durost said, "but I think we have an awful lot of average and better than average athletes that very often specialize in one sport with a dream and a goal that doesn't come true."

Durost said injuries among young athletes due to repetitive overuse is just one negative factor related to sport specialization.

"To me one of the values of high school athletics is that if you play two or three sports you're participating with different kids year-round, different coaches and different approaches to coaching," he said. "I think it helps the student get more out of the experience being around more and different kids and getting a variety of experiences with coaches."

Durost said parental influences on their children's athletic experiences

also can be an emotional part of the high school athletics equation.

"I don't think I've ever met a parent who didn't want the best for their own children, whether it's academics or with sports or anything in life," he said. "But sometimes there's undue stress from seeing specializing in a sport as the ticket to a college scholarship when, for almost every kid in high school, an athletic scholarship is not a realistic goal."

Sport specialization also may exacerbate the growing challenge of fielding full teams, particularly at the subvarsity level and in smaller schools.

"Certainly as enrollments have dropped in a good portion of the state it does become a serious concern, particularly in the smaller schools, but I think it's true in larger schools as well," he said.

Durost believes classification of schools is going to be an ongoing concern and said the MPA's goal remains to provide student-athletes an equitable opportunity to qualify for tournament play.

"I don't think we owe anybody the opportunity to compete for a state championship, but I think we owe, within our policies, kids and schools, and communities the opportunity to compete for that postseason berth," he said.

Durost played basketball and baseball in high school and college, and went on to officiate those sports, along with softball and soccer. For that reason, staffing postseason contests has been a high point of his MPA career.

"Without a doubt the most fun part is going to those tournaments —

watching kids, watching coaches, watching officials," he said. "Being around all of those people, there's pressure and frustration, but there's also the joy of being there to begin with and then the lessons for life of winning or losing along the way. That's been my favorite part."

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