

Controversy surrounding athletic transfers shows no signs of abating

[Gordon Engelhardt](#) | Evansville Courier & Press Updated 18 hours

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EVANSVILLE – There’s so much confusion surrounding high school athletic transfers that even the nomenclature is up for grabs.

It appears places throughout the state, especially cities such as Evansville, Indianapolis and Fort Wayne, have allowed “open enrollment” for several years, in which students attend a public school other than the one in their district without fear of reprisal. But that’s not always the case.

Evansville Vanderburgh School Corp. spokesman Jason Wuebkenberg said the proper term isn't "open enrollment." It's "adjustment transfer" from "attendance districts."

"Based on where a student lives in Vanderburgh County, they can go through the process of a transfer request," Wuebkenberg said. "Any family can fill out an adjustment transfer request form."

He said it's based on availability. For example, if a student going into ninth grade lives in the Central High School district and would like to go to Reitz, he would request a family adjustment transfer request form from Central. Central would contact Reitz and see if Reitz had the space to accommodate the student.

"I've been with the EVSC 24 years and we've always had adjustment transfers," Wuebkenberg said.

He also debunked the theory circulating that if a student behaved badly or was lacking in attendance he would be forced to attend the school in the district where he lives.

"A student is not revoked because of behavior or attendance," Wuebkenberg said.

North High School Principal John Skinner said the biggest problem regarding transfers, in his estimation, is sometimes there is a lack of communication.

"Sometimes, they don't communicate with us, what's going on," Skinner said. "All of a sudden, they're going to another school. It's happening throughout the state of Indiana. It's not just North, not just

the EVSC. It's happening throughout the state. There's a different side to all stories."

Hedgepeth sat out a year

While most students transfer without fanfare, C.J. Hedgepeth's move from North to Harrison in 2014-15 was considered an "athletic transfer," declaring he had "limited eligibility," according to the IHSAA.

As a result, he was forced to play junior varsity basketball his junior year at Harrison.

"If you don't change addresses, you can't play varsity," said EVSC Athletics Director Andy Owen. "There's the receiving school, the sending school and the IHSAA."

Because 365 days had passed, however, Hedgepeth was eligible to play for the Warriors in the Class 4A sectional semifinal against Reitz, which eventually advanced to the state championship game.

"I was hanging with the wrong crowd (at North)," Hedgepeth said. "My parents thought it would be best for me to transfer."

Because of a knee injury, he thought he would be out most of the upcoming season anyway. Hedgepeth had surgery to repair a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee the summer before his junior year.

"I came back sooner than I thought," said Hedgepeth, who averaged 14 points for North's varsity as a sophomore and 15 points his senior year at Harrison. "I was ready for the start of the season. I played the

whole JV season."

Regarded as Vincennes University's defensive stopper, Hedgepeth started 33 games for the Trailblazers, who placed fourth in the 2018 National Junior College Athletic Association tournament. He averaged 5.8 points and 3.3 rebounds for VU, which finished 34-3.

Hedgepeth was the second-leading scorer for Missouri S&T (5-21) with a 12.4 average last winter. He will be a senior this winter for the Miners, the University of Southern Indiana's rival in the NCAA Division II Great Lakes Valley Conference.

An all-Southern Indiana Athletic Conference defensive back and standout kick returner in the fall of 2014, he helped lift the Warriors to their first Class 4A sectional football title since 1997. We'll never know, but Hedgepeth thinks he might have been a Division I football player if he had continued to play throughout his high school career. He skipped football after his freshman year at North and didn't play again until his senior season at Harrison.

Hedgepeth has tremendous respect for Bryan Speer, his basketball coach at Harrison.

"He taught me a lot, on and off the court," Hedgepeth said. "He was a father figure off the court. It wasn't just a coaching relationship. Playing for Coach Speer is one of the best decisions I've made so far in my life."

Speer didn't know Hedgepeth until they met, but said they hit it off immediately.

"He had a smile on his face and was a really, really good athlete," Speer said. "He was a really hard worker, too. He responded well to my style and approach."

Although Hedgepeth lived near the airport, he said some of the athletes within the city limits had difficulty making the trek out to North. As a result, they transferred to other schools.

Again, Wuebkenberg said buses were readily available to any student in North's district, inside or outside of the city limits. He noted, however, that adjustment transfers had to find their own transportation to their "new" school.

"A lot of my friends transferred schools," Hedgepeth said. "It's too far to get transportation out there (to North)."

Skinner noted there is a bus that transports students to and from North before and after their extracurricular activities.

Currently Harrison's athletics director, Andre Thomas would have been Hedgepeth's basketball coach had he stayed at North for his junior year. Part of the reason he said he transferred was because he didn't get along with then-North coach Scot Bunnell.

"I believe 'let the kid go' and in my experience a lot of them (transfers) don't work out," Thomas said. "As far as the ones that do work out, we should be happy that the kid found a home that fits them because we are in this for the growth and development of our young people, not our own personal win-loss record."

Despite Wuebkenberg's protests about the term, IHSAA commissioner

Bobby Cox didn't have a problem saying "open enrollment."

"Quite frankly, 'open enrollment' has not had a dramatic effect on transfer eligibility or results," Cox said. "The IHSAA rules on about 4,200 transfers annually. This number has remained consistent for several years, amazingly. The association estimates that there are approximately 160,000 student athletes participating statewide. While around 4,200 transfers are adjudicated each year, nearly 156,000 students remain at their schools and participate.

"Also, consistently by year, of the 4,200 transfers, less than 1 percent of those students are ruled ineligible."

Sanford eventually eligible

Kolten Sanford's transfer from North to Bosse was originally considered an athletic transfer, but the IHSAA changed its ruling and made Sanford eligible to play for the Bulldogs' varsity last winter.

"Kolten Sanford was initially ruled ineligible under Rule 19-4, but the IHSAA Review Committee reversed that decision following his hearing and granted him full eligibility," said IHSAA sports information director Jason Wille.

The Rule 19-4 headline: "Transfer for primarily athletic reasons or the result of undue influence."

Kolten, the younger brother of former Reitz and University of Toledo standout Jaelan Sanford, averaged 16.7 points as a sophomore in leading North to the 2018 Class 4A sectional title, the Huskies' first in 20 years.

His junior season at Bosse was marred by a broken foot suffered Dec. 14 against Washington. He made his first start since returning to action on Feb. 26, hitting four successive 3-pointers in the second half of the Bulldogs' 66-62 victory over Heritage Hills in the Class 3A Boonville Sectional opener. It snapped the Patriots' school-record 19-game winning streak.

Bosse coach Shane Burkhart didn't want to comment on Sanford's transfer directly.

"What I will say about transferring is, sometimes kids don't have a choice," Burkhart said. "Situations happen within adult lives which we can't help. And kids just have to go along with what their parents are doing. If you take another job or your parents have to move, as a kid you don't have a choice."

Kyle Stewart transferred from North Posey to Central after the first semester last winter because of what he described as "bullying." A junior, Stewart went on to place third in the long jump in the state track and field meet with a leap of 23 feet, 6-1/4 inches. Janice Stewart, Kyle's mother, said he was contacted by Indiana University shortly after the state meet.

Kyle gained 400 yards rushing last fall for North Posey's football team, but does not plan to play for Central, which was the 4A state runner-up.

"I will not be playing football because I want to focus more on track and become a state champion next year," he said.

North Posey football coach and athletics director Waylon Schenk said

Stewart wasn't really happy at North Posey after his older brother, Alex, graduated. Alex, two years older, went to Birmingham Prep last year and will play football for Division II Central State (Ohio) this fall and have four full years of eligibility.

"In my opinion, if a kid is not happy, let him transfer," Schenk said. "He found a place where he could fit in better than North Posey. So, we signed off. We have a good relationship with his mom and dad and his brother. (Kyle) wasn't happy at North Posey."

Lairy twice lifted Bosse to state

For Mekhi Lairy, his choice was simple coming out of eighth grade. The bus to Bosse was two blocks closer to his house on Weinbach Avenue than the one to North, even though he technically lived in the North district. Obviously Weinbach is a lot closer to Bosse than North.

"I have always had a great relationship with my past teammates at Bosse," said Lairy, who sparked the Bulldogs to two state championship berths.

He said he knew some of them since they were all in diapers.

"I wanted to attend Bosse because of my housing situation," Lairy said. "It was a complete hassle for my mother (Jamila) to drive back and forth from North. She had to work a ton of hours, pick my little brother (Taray) up, then pick my sister (Malaya) up from her practices as well. I wanted to relieve some of that stress for her. So, I made the decision to attend Bosse."

Lairy, who became the City's all-time scorer leader with 2,237 points,

will be a sophomore at Miami (Ohio) this fall. He is No. 18 on Indiana's career scoring list.

Although buses to and from North may be available, Schenk, a Bosse graduate, noted that it's difficult to spend as much as 45 minutes on a bus one way getting to North. Burkhart agreed.

"It has nothing to do with North," Burkhart said. "North isn't doing anything wrong. They go to where it's the easiest. Unless you're a north suburban kid it can be a pain to get out there and that's why a lot of kids go to other schools."

Lairy said being a part of two state teams was an amazing experience.

"Something that not every high school athlete gets to experience and to be a part of that twice was a great feeling," he said. "It is something that I will remember forever.

"Of course, it hurts being so close and not winning, but the sting is a little less than it used to be. I try to think and remember the positives out of the runs we had rather than the game itself."

Lairy can't wait for his sophomore season at Miami.

"My freshman year was great," he said. "Of course, there were ups and downs, but I truly believe that my teammates and coaching staff has helped me mold into not only a better basketball player, but a person as well. We didn't finish off the season like we wanted, but I believe that we'll get there and reach our goal of a MAC championship really soon."

According to Burkhart, if the school's district extended a couple of more blocks in different directions, it would be a Class 4A school instead of a 3A school.

"From a coaches' standpoint it's not frustrating," he said. "We have been and will continue to be one of the best 3A programs in the state. I think it stinks for our football, baseball, softball and track programs. It really doesn't make sense to me to have three different school districts within two miles of Bosse going west."

Burkhart said "open enrollment" is the right thing.

"As a parent you want what you feel is best for your child's academic situation," he said.

And the best athletic situation as well.

Transferring is almost an epidemic at the college level and it has a trickle-down effect to high school, Schenk said.

Burkhart, however, doesn't think there is a transfer issue at the prep level and is often benefits college athletes.

"First of all, a lot of transfers are grad transfers," he said. "That should be celebrated. Kids are graduating from college and the rules are allowing them to have a bigger opportunity than before. That's not a kid problem, that's a rule problem.

"Second, if someone is forced to transfer that means a coach and program has moved on to another person. Recruiting is a dirty business and coaches are always looking for the 'next best thing.' They

tell you are the one, but recruit your position the very next year.

"And third, you as a player aren't always mature enough to make a life decision, so you jump into it because the way they make you feel or the recruiting visit is fantastic."

Some college coaches are great salesmen, Burkhart said.

"They have to be, but sometimes you buy a lemon or your Cadillac has too many miles," he said. "It is what it is. At the end of the day all parties have to do what's right for them."

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