

4 takeaways from the Courier Journal's 'Safer Sidelines' event on sudden death in sports



The Courier Journal hosted a panel discussion Wednesday evening about its recent [Safer Sidelines](#) investigation into sudden death in high school sports, [furthering the national conversation on the issue](#).

The project revealed how, across the nation and in Kentucky, thousands of high schools don't have "gold standard" policies in place to protect young athletes; legislation to mandate such standards is routinely defeated or watered down; and policies and laws that are in place have little enforcement and are often ignored.

The panelists included:

Kentucky High School Athletic Association commissioner Julian Tackett;

State Rep. Kim Moser, R-Taylor Mill, who worked on recent Kentucky sports safety legislation;

Alma Mattocks, program director for the Spalding University Master of Science in Athletic Training program;

Matthew Mangine Sr., co-founder of the Matthew Mangine Jr. "One Shot" Foundation, which was created to honor his son, who collapsed during soccer conditioning in June 2020.

Safer Sidelines project reporter [Stephanie Kuzydym](#) moderated the panel, held at Spalding University.

Here are four takeaways from the event:

Constant education needed to compensate for high turnover

No state requires all five of the common "gold standards" of sports medicine for high school sidelines: athletic trainers, venue-specific emergency action plans (EAPs), defibrillators (AEDs), cold water immersion tubs and wet bulb globe temperature monitors.

Tackett described Kentucky as a "local control state" when it comes to implementing sports safety reform, and he said the KHSAA does not have the authority to mandate AEDs for its member schools without legislative approval.

Still, when faced with costs needed to establish sports safety procedures, all four panelists agreed that athletic department and school district funds need to be prioritized.

While Tackett recognized the costs of AEDs and other gold standards, he noted the already lucrative costs of youth sports participation.

Moser, a nurse and Spalding alumna, echoed Tackett's sentiments and noted that education efforts within the state legislature will need to continue to make up for the lack of medical background in the overall legislative body.

"We really take issue with the priorities, or the lack of priority, that some schools put on the safety of our kids," Moser said.

Putting new turf fields or major renovations on hold, in favor of safety spending, could be the measure that saves lives, the panelists agreed.

"We need to make sure that we're spending the money on safety before we're even thinking about adding new fields," Mattocks said.

But equipment is only part of the broader school safety problem. Many KHSAA coaches are not school employees, and half of all athletic administrators started after the COVID-19 pandemic, Tackett said. That can lead to a lack of institutional knowledge, and creates the need for constant re-education.

There were five AEDs on site when Mangine's son, Matthew Jr., died in June 2020. None was brought to help.

"Equipment isn't necessarily the issue. What we're talking about here is education," Mangine said.

You may like: [Most Kentucky public schools don't follow emergency planning law, leaving athletes at risk](#)

There is a shortage of athletic trainers

The first gold standard of care has always been having an athletic trainer, but the field is not being replenished with new master's level program graduates in Kentucky, especially since the pandemic.

Spalding's program head said there was work to be done to address the issues in pay and work conditions for athletic trainers but noted that the lack of advocacy for safe sidelines correlates to the athletic trainer shortage.

"We need to be valued and supported and given the tools that we need to be successful on the sidelines," Mattocks said.

And she wants to see budding athletic trainers and emergency medical technicians working together as students to foster a bond that can last as both groups move into the professional world.

"Traditionally, athletic training programs and emergency medical services have not worked together, they haven't educated together, learned together, and that's an issue," Mattocks said.

Parents have a role on the front lines of accountability

For Mangine and his wife, Kim, their advocacy through the Matthew Mangine Jr. Foundation has been a part of their grief process since losing their oldest son. Since Buffalo Bills cornerback [Damar Hamlin collapsed](#) in a nationally televised game on Jan. 2, the crowd of listeners throughout the country has grown.

The other panelists agreed that parents like the Mangines have the

power to make change at the school level. Moser said the venue-specific EAP is a good place to start asking questions to a school's administrators.

"Parents really are in the best position to make this happen," Moser said.

Mattocks agrees and thinks parents should not take 'no' for an answer when asking questions about vital safety reforms. Tackett said addressing the issue with the same weight as a child's on-field performance will raise safer sidelines on the list of priorities.

"As parents, we need to ask these questions," Mattocks said.

Mangine pointed to [the 10 questions](#) that Marty McNair, father of former University of Maryland offensive lineman Jordan McNair, posed in his book "Can My Child Play: The Questions We Should Have Asked."

He agreed that the parent base has the capacity to make change, and so do teachers in using their power to ask for donations for AEDs and other life-saving equipment, often provided by foundations like Mangine's.

These questions to ask coaches and administrators can be the first step in ensuring parents like the Mangines and McNair will be in a minority as preventable death in sports is eradicated.

"We just assumed, and that's something that to this day, I think we both regret," Mangine said.

For parents: [Sports safety: 10 questions to ask if you're a parent of a youth athlete](#)

Expect more work in the Kentucky legislature on safer sidelines

Gov. Andy Beshear signed Moser's House Bill 331 into law in early May. It recommends external automated defibrillators (AEDs) be in middle and high schools "as funds become available."

So, what's next in the fight for safer sidelines?

During the next legislative session, Moser intends to work for an appropriation to help fund HB 331.

Panelists also discussed a possible public-facing database on gold standard and safety training compliance in Kentucky. Tackett said the KHSAA has offered to help the state with this inventory.

Mangine echoed Tackett in that peer pressure will be a prime motivator in schools complying with the gold standards.

"Once one school is doing it, other schools are going to have to follow," Mangine said.

The details of how schools will qualify for AED assistance through HB 331 are still being worked out in collaboration with Tackett and the KHSAA, but Moser said a first-come, first-served basis for schools that demonstrate a lack of funding is likely. While that happens, she urged schools to begin their applications as soon as possible.

"The sooner that a school recognizes that they have this need, the better," Moser said.

More: [Solutions for youth sports safety: How one state used data to](#)

[make a difference.](#)

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