

Schools voice opposition to bylaw change at LHSAA meeting; decision pending Wednesday

LHSAA Executive Director Eddie Bonine speaks during during the House Education Committee meeting about starting high school football games.

PHOTO BY PATRICK DENNIS

Some LHSAA executive committee meetings move along swiftly with little commentary from member schools. The first day of the two-day fall meeting was not one of them.

The Tuesday meeting opened with a large group of coaches and administrators representing parochial and magnet schools voicing opposition and concerns about an LHSAA bylaw change that limits eligibility for incoming ninth-grade students at their schools.

Three Baton Rouge-area athletic directors — Ben DiPalma of Catholic, Randy Richard of Episcopal and Erin Hart of St. Joseph's Academy — were among the speakers during the meeting held at the LHSAA office.

After the speakers finished, the committee went into executive session for the remainder of its nearly four-hour meeting for discussion and also to handle a series of appeals.

LHSAA executive director Eddie Bonine said any decision on the bylaw would happen during Wednesday's meeting that begins at 9 a.m. at the LHSAA office.

"They are complaining about the same thing, which is the removal of the bylaw that has to do with (students in) the same school system," Bonine said. "We've had the JV participation rule for those students.

"When I do eligibility, I don't yell down the hall and say, 'Would you look to see if Eddie Bonine High School has JV swimming or not.' And then if they don't ... rule them eligible as a varsity athlete. That's not the way the rule is in place.

"They gave good arguments today. They all came well prepared. They all argued that they should have certain feeder schools. The committee wants to network and talk during dinner and make a decision tomorrow. At the end of the day, that particular rule was voted on in January."

In January, LHSAA member schools voted 195-174 to remove the phrase "same school system" from eligibility bylaws.

Previously, students moving from parochial middle schools and students in magnet programs that encompass all grades and multiple schools were able to gain freshman eligibility for varsity competition

through that terminology.

Caddo Parish and Lafayette High were the public schools that helped open the discussion.

"All public-school students in the state have an option to be eligible at a school as freshmen," DiPalma said. "All we are asking for is that our students have that same option.

"The LHSAA is built on the spirit of parochial schools and public schools working together to do the best they can for all the students in Louisiana."

The impact the ruling has on many girls sports and minor sports was noted. St. Louis Catholic principal Mia Touchet noted that the change will make it impossible for her Class 3A school to field a varsity softball team.

"We should not penalize parents for making academic decisions," St. Louis athletic director Pat Neck said.