

## HIGH SCHOOL

### What new IHSAA transfer rule means: Is it 'end of high school sports as we know it?'



**Kyle Neddenriep**

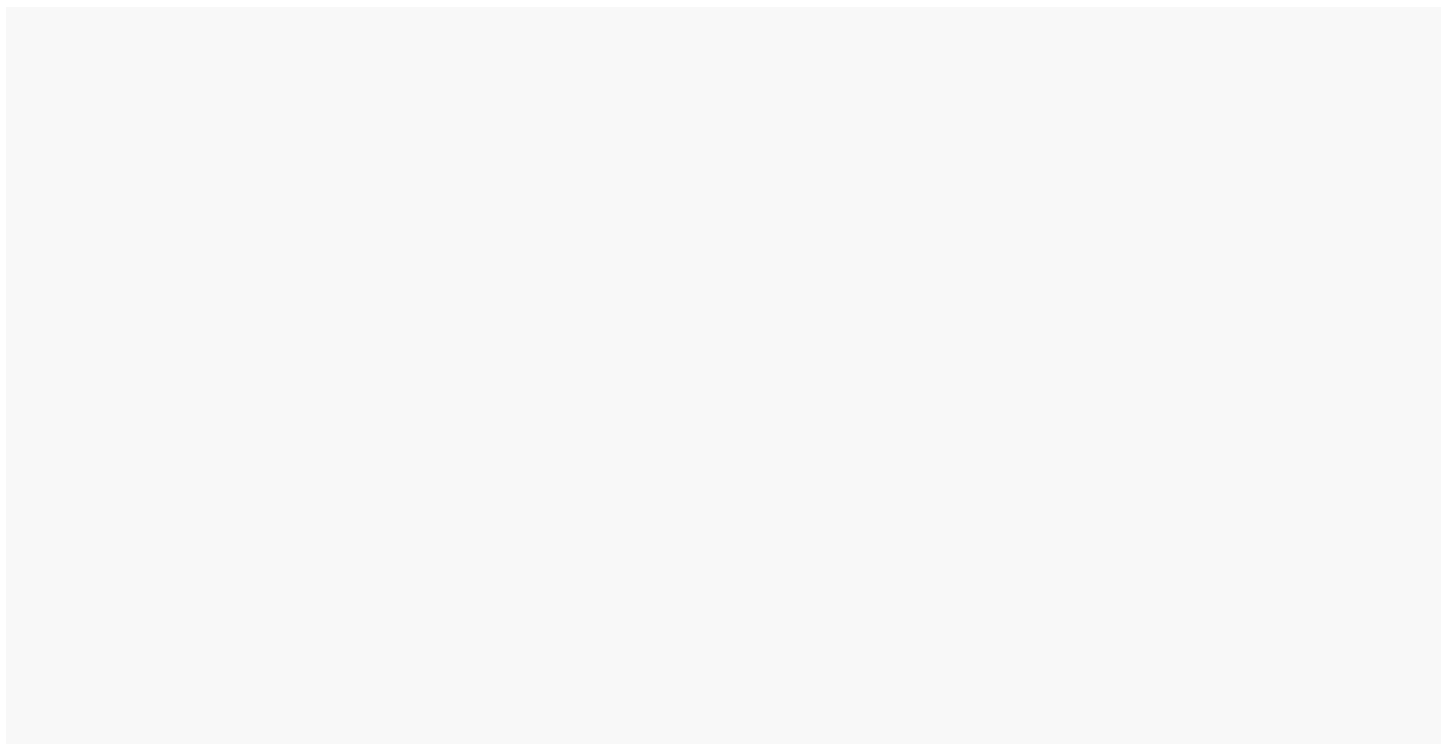
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For better or worse, a significant change is coming to high school sports if a proposal to allow a first-time transfer for athletes is voted through Friday at the Indiana High School Athletic Association's next executive board meeting.

I expect it will pass.

I'm sure there are those who are jumping up and down in elation and others who believe this will be the end of high school sports as we know them. Then, there are a lot of us who probably fall somewhere in the middle.



It might be instructive to understand what is happening, why it is happening now and where this first-time transfer might lead us in the future:

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## **Where it started**

If you have been following high school sports, the discussion on transfers and how to process athletic transfers is nothing new. Indiana's first high school basketball state champion, the 1911 Crawfordsville team, had a transfer from rival Lebanon, Orville Taylor.

The IHSAA has long had a rule against athletic transfers. You could argue for or against how successful the IHSAA has been in upholding that bylaw, or how much time, money and energy is spent in appeals, investigations and legal proceedings is worth upholding that rule.

The impetus for change started with state legislators, who are advocating for school choice even when it comes to athletics. House Bill 1064, which is authored by State Representative Cory Criswell (R-Middletown), would eliminate the language from Indiana code about transferring for athletic reasons. That bill, which passed the full House and is now moving to the Senate, is in conjunction with the expected change the IHSAA will make to its bylaw on Friday.

In 2011, under then-governor Mitch Daniels, legislation was passed to allow tax dollars to follow a student to an out-of-district school. That change in school choice did not necessarily apply to athletics, however.

“This change (in the statehouse) does nothing to eliminate our ability to effectively utilize a transfer rule,” IHSAA commissioner Paul Neidig said. “The original bill just said you couldn’t transfer for athletic reasons and the school retain the funding. It simply removed that portion of the bill. But it doesn’t take away from our ability to use a transfer rule.”

But this change did start with lawmakers, not the IHSAA. Indiana is not alone. In 2023, West Virginia passed a law to allow athletes a one-time transfer with immediately eligibility. Lawmakers in West Virginia are now considering putting more guardrails on its law, including eliminating high school seniors' ability to transfer without restrictions.

“A lot of our concerns aren't things that are quantifiable. We can't quantify how this tears apart the community fabric aspect of our programs,” West Virginia Athletic Directors Association president David Viands told lawmakers last month, according to West Virginia Watch. “They're displacing students who have lived in that community and have been in that community for a long time. We need to evaluate long-term implications for this rule and look at solutions.”

Florida essentially has no restrictions. Athletes can transfer during the season and continuing play that sport after changes to state law. Several other states, with school choice driving the

conversation, are either considering loosening restrictions on athletic transfers, or already have.

“I don’t begrudge parents for school choice,” Neidig said. “I get that. But a parent’s choice is always absent of the effect on somebody else’s child. And that’s OK from that parent’s point of view. But it’s not OK for the parent who gets affected by somebody else’s choice along the way.”

## **What a first-time transfer will be**

If the proposal passes, the new first-time transfer bylaw will go into effect on June 1.

What is a first-time transfer?

An athlete who transfers prior to their senior year will receive full eligibility. Unless there is found to be undue influence or recruiting of that athlete, they will be cleared to participate regardless of the reason for the transfer.

Will this open the floodgates to more transfers? There were 3,466 transfers during the 2023-24 school year and 2,730 from July 1 through Jan. 9 of this year.

“I think time will tell,” Neidig said. “We are going to double the number eligibility hearings we have this year. We’re realistic enough to realize society is changing and certainly the changes the NCAA has made has changed things. School choice has an influence on this. It’s a different day and age than we’ve dealt with in the past.”

Unlike Florida, or the NCAA, there will be restrictions on a second transfer, athletes transferring as a senior and athletes transferring in-season. There will be a 30-day 'non-compete' for athletes in those situations during the competition season in each sport they participated in the previous season.

There will also be parameters around a significant move on eligibility on a second transfer. Neidig said you "won't be able to just move around the block" and gain eligibility.



“If there’s a move from South Bend to Evansville, we’ll have to look at that a little differently compared to a move in the same geographic area,” Neidig said. “And we’ll still have a hardship rule. If there’s something that has happened that is complete out of control of the student, then we’ll have a path of eligibility in those situations.”

### **How will this proposal change high school sports?**

Neidig points out the IHSAA has made 26 bylaw changes to its transfer rules since the 2012-13 school year. Most recently, the IHSAA added a “principals’ waiver.” Under the change, an athlete could receive eligibility after principals from both the sending and receiving schools had a conversation.

“We already have a lot of students falling within those waivers,” Neidig said. “The vast majority of the students are finding their way through the transfer system with the current rules we have.”

Roughly 93% of transfers during the 2023-24 school year, and so far this year, have received full eligibility. So far this year, 2,537 transfers have received full eligibility, 165 have received limited

eligibility and 28 have been declared ineligible.

So, we are clearly not going from 0 to 100 here. Transfers are happening now, have been happening and will continue to happen. Go through the rosters of any high school basketball team in the metropolitan Indianapolis area (not all but most) and you can likely find at least one or two players who started high school somewhere else.

But what this looks like for a school in rural Indiana is probably something else entirely. The accessibility to athletes in a Marion County school or surrounding county is much higher than a school in Ohio or Union County.

“My biggest concern is how do we continue to have a balanced athletic system?” Neidig said. “You have some schools where this is not going to affect anything. Their kids are their kids. They are far enough away that they aren’t going to drive to other places. Yet they might have that once every 20 years great team and they go up against a team coming from a large metropolitan area. Some people think we need to look at how we classify schools after this change.”

## **On undue influence**

Look for the IHSAA to make undue influence an increased priority if the first-time transfer goes through.

“The downside of this (proposal) will be if parents start transferring for solely athletic reasons and the AAU U-17 team tries to join up at one place,” Neidig said. “We’ll have to see if that is actually going to happen in places. By being in control of the rules, we can see trends and if we need to make adjustments in the future, we’ll be able to potentially do that.”

Neidig said he is asking conferences to also take a stand against undue influence in their bylaws. If there is a school that is found guilty of undue influence, the opposing school has the option to drop the contract.

“We’re going to look at our rules around undue influence significantly and probably take a different approach,” Neidig said. “Our bylaw says a coach who violates the rule can lose accreditation and if they lose accreditation, they lose the ability to coach. I can see that happening more.”

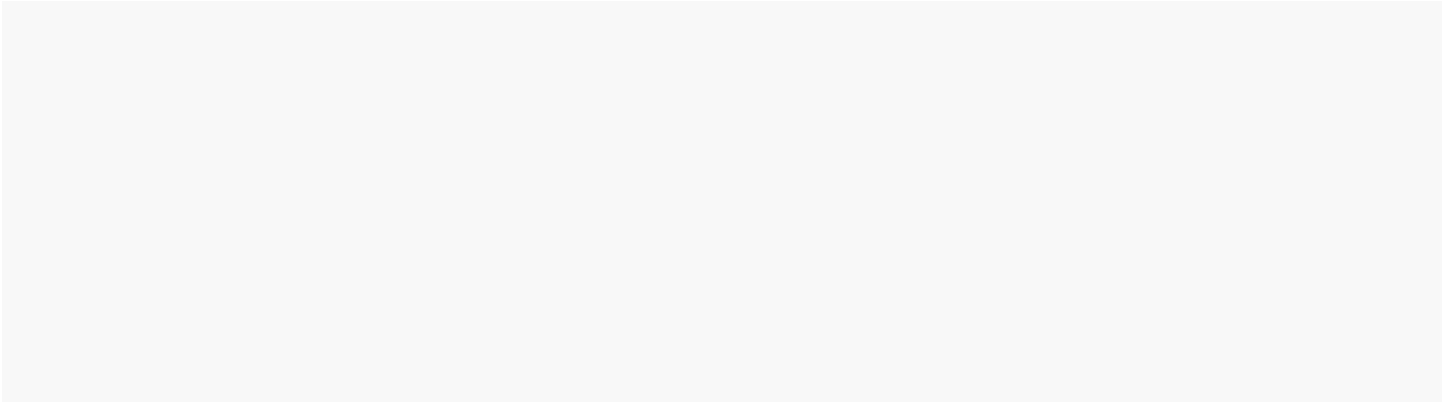
### **My thoughts**

If a school does not take out-of-district transfers currently, they are under no obligation to do so if this proposal passes. However, I expect we will probably see more schools willing to take transfers if it goes through.

I do think this rule change can add some clarity to a transfer process that has befuddled some over the years where two transfers can look the same and have different eligibility outcomes. The fewer hearings and appeals, the better.

Will this drive veteran coaches out of the business? I asked football coaches back in August for our 'Coaches Confidential' series and most were against the idea, though this idea was preferable to the NCAA model.

"This is a tough question," one coach wrote. "Kids are transferring a lot anyway for sports reasons and they know how to play the system to get eligibility in my opinion. I don't want high school athletics to end up like college, though, where kids are constantly looking for a better option and there is little loyalty."



Neidig mentioned there are “people out there who think this could be the end of high school sports as we know it,” and others who believe it won’t be significant. I fall somewhere in the middle of that. I see the good (more black-and-white transfer rules) and the bad (recruiting athletes and kids in community getting displaced).

Like it or not, it appears change is coming.



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