

TSSAA one-time transfer proposal in Tennessee approved with 8-4 vote

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This story was updated with new information.

HERMITAGE — The [TSSAA Legislative Council](#) approved a proposal Monday that will allow athletes one free transfer to another school without loss of eligibility if the transfer is for reasons unrelated to athletics.

The Council approved the proposal in an 8-4 vote at its special-called meeting. The new bylaw allows students one free transfer to another school due to reasons of significant academic, social-emotional, environmental or mental health need as long as the sending school's administration could attest the move is not for athletic or disciplinary reasons.

The move was not as extreme as what [Tennessee legislators](#) are considering in House Bill 25, which if passed into law, would change [TSSAA transfer rules](#) to allow athletes one free transfer without eligibility restrictions regardless of the reason.

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"This certainly expanded opportunities for transfers for anyone," TSSAA executive director Mark Reeves said. "This is certainly going to expand the number of kids who seek to transfer."

The TSSAA's long-standing rule said all students who leave one school for another in a different zone to be ineligible for one calendar year from their last varsity game unless they have a bona fide change of address.

Reeves said the TSSAA "had to find a way" to make kids eligible if the

move was for academic reasons. He reiterated to the Council before the vote that the TSSAA's hardship appeal process does not currently provide students a way to make legitimate academic transfers without penalty. The hardship appeal process does include social-emotional, environmental or mental health. Now, those factors will be weighed by schools from which athletes transfer.

"It always seemed strange to me that that was never part of (the rules)," McCallie athletics director Kenny Sholl said. "That goes back to the very first foundational component of what the TSSAA is about."

Sholl was one of the eight who voted for the change.

Siegel athletics director Greg Wyant, Waverly assistant principal Les Trotter, Huntingdon director of schools Jonathan Kee and Millington director of schools Bo Griffin voted no.

"I think this opens it up for some people who are looking of ways to transfer (just for athletics)," Wyant said. "What I worry about are the guardrails we have to be able to ensure that if what (families) say are the right reasons are actually the right reasons."

Having a voucher will not automatically give a student immediate eligibility at another school, Reeves said. If a student has a voucher but is moving schools for disciplinary reasons, a school can report to the TSSAA that it doesn't meet the requirements.

The Council did not discuss when the new rule will not go into effect, but Reeves said it won't happen until at least July.

Sen. Adam Lowe releases statement about TSSAA one-time transfer change

HB25's author, Scott Cepicky, R-Culleoka, told The Tennessean he would pull the legislation if the Council approved a change that aligned with the bill. Cepicky and Senator Adam Lowe, R-Calhoun, a co-sponsor of the bill, both said last week that the TSSAA's new proposal wasn't sufficient enough to do that.

But Lowe showed appreciation for the TSSAA's move in a statement to The Tennessean.

"(The) TSSAA passed changes today that expanded the ability for students to transfer when due to non-athletic reasons. Though I feel this change stops short of recognizing students rights and parental control, I do recognize it to be progress and want to thank Director Reeves for getting in the weeds to find that progress," Lowe said. "The legislature will soon review these rule changes to see how we can codify the progress in state law with regard to the Access and Opportunity Act while continuing to seek solutions that protect our schools. Further, we hope TSSAA continues to work with us to further untie the bonds of captivity that restrict student athletes inequitably compared to other transferring students and coaches."

The TSSAA and lawmakers have been discussing the association's transfer rules for more than a year. TSSAA member schools have wanted to keep previous rule as is. Legislators pushed to make the rule less restrictive in light of the Tennessee legislature's approval of a \$447 million statewide publicly funded school voucher program.

The TSSAA Legislative Council unanimously denied a proposal at its Feb. 4 meeting that aligned with HB25 and would have allowed an unrestricted one-time transfer for athletes. Council members said they wanted to find a pathway for students to transfer without restriction as

long as the move didn't involve athletics. That drove the TSSAA staff to write the proposal considered on Monday.

Reeves said it would be an "interesting" meeting in April if HB25 passes. He acknowledged the role the legislature's interest played in the Legislative Council's decision.

"(Legislative involvement) certainly helped expedite that," Reeves said. "The Access and Opportunity Act, when Sen. Lowe was first elected, that was the first conversation that we had where this was brought to the table for us to ask the membership (if they wanted it). And we're thankful for that, because it's initiated this dialogue."

What's next for TSSAA transfer proposal?

The TSSAA voted to return in April to discuss more specifics about the proposal, such as how long schools will have to verify whether the student is transferring for non-athletic reasons.

After an athlete transfers one time under the new rule, all eligibility issues will be addressed through the TSSAA's hardship rule, which requires a formal appeal to the TSSAA executive director.

Also Monday, the Council approved a change that will not allow athletic eligibility for an international student who has completed secondary school requirements in his/her country of origin.

The move was brought on by the advantage boarding schools had in gaining international. Sholl said most of McCallie's international transfers have been coming from Quebec, Canada, which ends high school after 10th grade.

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