

# PIAA competitive balance rule is anything but balanced

Rep. Robert Matzie January 6, 2022 | 2:26 PM

On Jan. 4 the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association released its list of football classifications for the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years.

Using total male enrollment numbers for grades 9 through 11, the PIAA separates football programs into six classifications, with 6A being the largest and 1A being the smallest. The range for 5A is 383 to 557. Aliquippa currently has 118 boys enrolled yet was classified as 5A.

Yes, you read that right. How is that possible? The answer is something called the PIAA competitive balance rule. Ironic, given that the way it is being applied to Aliquippa is anything but balanced.

I don't need to recap the success and tradition of Aliquippa football to anyone even remotely aware of sports in Western PA. Aliquippa football has always voluntarily played a level or two above their designated classification for years. They have embraced the challenge and competition that goes with playing bigger schools with larger enrollment and more resources. Which brings us back to the competitive balance rule.

Originally instituted to prevent open transfer recruiting by private high school sports factories, the competitive balance rule uses a program's number of transfers combined with "success points" to determine if that program should be automatically elevated a classification level. But this rule has a fundamental flaw – it does not take into consideration the reason that a student athlete might change schools.

In communities such as Aliquippa, kids come and go based on the economic situation of their immediate and extended families. That's a fact. People aren't moving to Aliquippa to play football. It's just not happening. That's reality. It is almost always a financial or a familial issue. Simply put, Aliquippa's situation is not one for which this rule was implemented.

But that doesn't matter to the PIAA. Aliquippa spent the last two years forced to compete at the 4A level (having voluntarily played at 3A before that). Shortly after that decision, I questioned PIAA Executive Director Dr. Robert Lombardi about the situation, hoping that raising awareness of the issue in general and specifically with him would result in a genuine review and a positive outcome.

Aliquippa appealed that decision and lost. They plan to appeal this decision, and they will almost assuredly lose this appeal, too. How do I know? Because the PIAA executive staff has already said so publicly and repeatedly stating "a transfer, is a transfer, is a transfer" and "in my opinion, they have no legitimate complaint" and that "they should move up." It appears, as is often said, the fix is in.

By arbitrarily applying the competitive balance rule to Aliquippa, and forcing them to play at 5A, the PIAA is refusing to acknowledge the circumstances of the community involved and is ignoring the socio-economic demographics that drive transfers in and out of the school district. They are being punished for not having a lot of money and for being good at football. Does that sound balanced to you?

I have always fought for the communities in my district and always will. There are times when leaders need to stand up and be heard. This is one of those times. I will not stand by while our kids are being wronged and will never stop this fight.

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