

## A level playing field: Public and private school athletics

Crisp, fall Friday nights under the lights. Sneakers squeaking on a polished gym floor in February. Warm spring afternoons with thoughts drifting between the action on the track and graduation only a few weeks away. For many, there is nothing that captures the American high school experience quite like athletics. Nothing that defines this unique rite of passage more than representing your team, your school, your town on the field or court. And while the perception of this experience on an individual young athlete can weigh heavily on that person's development into young adulthood (and beyond) it is often magnified ten-fold for the towns and communities who put so much identity into following the rise and fall of their local team. It is here where a simmering debate is threatening the relationship between our state's public and private schools.

### The issue

The organization given responsibility for coordinating high school activities, including athletics, is the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association (WIAA). This voluntary association consists of representatives from each public and private middle and secondary school program wishing to participate in interscholastic competitive programs in dance, drama, music and arts, debate or sports.

As one can imagine, controversy in competition is nothing new in Washington. The roots of the WIAA can be traced back to the early 1900's when "deep concern over interscholastic athletics" gave birth to its predecessor organization. The Association has long provided the vehicle for rational discussion and debate when viewpoints conflicted and offers a means - through a representative vote - to develop policies that assist member schools in operating student programs that "foster achievement, respect, equity, enthusiasm and excellence in a safe and organized environment."

One of the strong points of the WIAA legacy has been its long-standing recognition of public and private school members as equal partners in this venture. In fact, on a school

level, the WIAA model is one of the best examples of positive statewide public and private school collaboration. For the past few years, however, a lingering discontent has been expressed by a few representatives from mostly small, rural schools suggesting that perhaps it is time to consider placing public and private high schools into separate divisions; if not for the regular season, then certainly for allocation to post season tournaments. A series of discussions aimed at addressing the issue has surfaced these main points of tension:

- Athletic leagues are grouped by not only by region but also by size. Small schools play small schools. Large schools play large schools. The increase of small, urban private schools over the last twenty years, coupled with the changing demographics and economies of many small, rural communities, has created a new paradigm.
- There exists a perception that rural communities with small populations have a limited talent pool from which to draw student-athletes. They also cite fewer big city community resources (e.g., year-round club level teams, superior training facilities, access to higher-level coaching, etc.). This would suggest that they have a harder time competing with urban small schools believed to have more to offer and larger populations from which to draw students.
- Some small communities feel this imbalance in opportunity makes it far more difficult for their school to

find success in the state playoff system (especially in the smallest school classification) in sports like basketball where one above-average athlete might make a noticeable difference.

While these concerns have yet to take root with the vast majority represented by the WIAA and the issue appears on the surface to be a small school concern, recent developments such as the re-alignment in Seattle's Metro League 3A divisions (separating district teams from private and suburban schools) suggests a precedent that could act as a wedge between historically supportive elements of the Association.

All parties have pledged to continue working to identify potential remedies to resolve the lingering tension. In the interim, it is wise to ask ourselves what we, in the private school community, can do to help give value to the relationship.

- Do we, as competitors and parents, do everything we can to represent our programs (and consequently all private schools) in the best light? Win or lose, are we good sports? Are we supportive, not just of our own team, but of quality competition on both sides? Do we look for ways to applaud rather than jeer? Do we show cordial courtesy to visiting teams and officials?
- Are our programs representative of the populations we serve, giving opportunities to all? Do we operate our programs ethically; not just by the letter of the rule but the spirit as well? Are we committed to the benefits of participation or just to winning? Do we take responsibility for being the same kind of partner we'd expect in another school?

Visit our web site at [www.wfis.org](http://www.wfis.org) for more information on Washington's private schools.

For school activities information, click on [www.wiaa.com](http://www.wiaa.com)

The preliminary discussions have already surfaced one good realization: We need each other. There is a unified desire to strengthen WIAA's position as legitimately representative of all this state's high schools - whether public or private. The field is level. We just need to keep it maintained.