

Youth org: Students need athletic trainers or doctors at every school

By Philip Elliott Associated Press Contra Costa Times

Posted:

InsideBayArea.com

WASHINGTON -- Student athletes need access to health care professionals, better-trained coaches and up-to-date equipment, a coalition of groups recommended Wednesday in a call to action aimed at protecting the nearly 8 million students participating in high school sports each year.

The Youth Sports Safety Alliance of more than 100 groups released the proposed rules, which call for health providers such as athletic trainers or doctors available for every school, warnings about performance-enhancing substances for athletes and the creation of a national registry to track student athlete deaths. The rules also would require schools to have clean and well maintained facilities, and require students to have a physical exam -- including testing for concussions -- before their season starts.

While many of the requirements are already standard practice in many places, the document being presented Wednesday to lawmakers on Capitol Hill is the first comprehensive and national plan aimed at protecting students who participate on their schools' teams. The group is urging each state to adopt the "Secondary School Student Athletes' Bill of Rights."

"In most states, the state high school athletic associations control all the health and safety policies for our student athletes," said Douglas Casa, an expert on sudden deaths in sports and a professor at the University of Connecticut who helped write the proposed rules. "That should scare a lot of people in this room. If you had a family member with cancer, would you seek out a coach for advice? Their opinion on health and safety issues is not relevant."

Among the ideas are requirements that all schools regularly update their sports facilities and equipment and tell parents and students about the risks of playing sports. Coaches would be required to know CPR, have plans in case of an emergency and have regular reviews of how to handle injuries.

At least 34 student athletes died last year, the alliance said. Some 39 student athletes died in 2011 and 49 in 2010.

The decline is in part because 43 states have passed laws that require a doctor's note before an athlete returns to play after a concussion injury.

But while the total number of injuries has fallen, the rate of concussions has risen, leading to long-term health risks for these athletes.

"We need to try harder to protect these student athletes," said Christopher Nowinski, the co-director of the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy at Boston University's School of Medicine.

"Think about this: You get an injury in the NFL, you have two guys at your side right away," the former Harvard football player and WWE professional wrestler added. "We do not provide a single professional medical person to half of high schools. ... Every time we don't have an athletic trainer, we're leaving 80 percent of concussions on the field. The number one place where we're failing them is we aren't getting them off the field."

More students die during high school than in college or professional competitions. Yet only 42 percent of high schools have access to an athletic trainer and 47 percent of schools even come up short on the federally recommended nurse-to-student ratio.

That comes as some 400,000 concussions occurred in high school sports during the 2008-09 school year. More than 7.5 million students played that year, the National Federation of State High School Associations reported.

"You wouldn't put a football team out on the field if you don't have enough money to buy helmets. Why are you putting a football team on the field if you don't have enough money to hire a fulltime certified athletic trainer?" asked Dawn Comstock, an expert on school sports who teaches at the Colorado School of Public Health.

"How come less than a third of all high schools employ a fulltime certified athletic trainer?" she continued.

More than 7.6 million students played high school sports last year and scores more played on club or private-league teams. The increase in participation comes as childhood obesity rates have declined slightly.

President Barack Obama himself weighed in recently of the safety issue, saying that he'd think twice if he had a son who wanted to play football.

"We are a sports-crazed society," said Kevin Guskiewicz, a professor at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill who studies sports concussions.

Two of his three sons played football last fall and he recognizes the risks.

"There's not a concussion-proof helmet that's out there," he said. "My colleagues think I'm crazy for letting my kids play football."