



Ohio House Criminal Justice Committee

Proponent Testimony on HB 139

Ohio High School Athletic Association

June 14, 2023

Chairman Abrams, Vice Chair Williams, Ranking Member Brown, & members of the House Criminal Justice Committee:

My name is Beau Rugg and I am the Director of Sport Management and Officiating at the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA). Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. The bill under consideration is one that passed this committee in prior sessions with bipartisan support, and previously passed a vote in the full house with bipartisan support as well. It is our hope that the same thing will happen in this session, and that we can make this bill a law.

For a bit of background information, the OHSAA is a private, not-for-profit, unincorporated association. Membership in the organization is completely voluntary, and we are currently made up of 818-member high schools and approximately 750-member 7/8 grade schools. 100% of Ohio's public-school districts are members of the association, and approximately 20% of our membership is made up of chartered non-public schools. Our policies are approved by the membership as a whole and we are led by a governing board made up of individuals representing all segments of our membership demographic. We also provide officiating licenses for over 15,000 officials on an annual basis.

Unfortunately, assaults on officials have been on the rise. I am sure you have seen some of the most egregious acts on the news. I began my role at the OHSAA in 2012. In the first 5 years of my tenure, we had zero reported instances of physical abuse against an official and fan confrontations with officials after the contest. Since that time, however, instances like these have increased annually. We have had over 300 submitted sportsmanship reports from officials each of the last two school years. Most of those reports are about concerning fan behavior.

What is disturbing is that often the perpetrators show no remorse for their actions after the fact. There was an incident a few years ago in southeast Ohio in which a basketball official was assaulted and received death threats on the court after the game. The two perpetrators involved were banned from attending OHSAA tournament games due to their behavior, which was captured on video. When informed of this ban, the individuals threatened to sue the OHSAA and stated that their behavior, and I quote, "*was allowed*" because the official was "*terrible.*" In the not-so-distant past, fans would never walk on to the court in basketball. Now, especially below the varsity level, fans walk right onto the court to confront officials. Additionally, in outdoor sports, officials routinely receive verbal abuse while walking to their vehicles after contests.

The lack of respect for officials is at an all-time high. Perfection is the perceived standard, and if you do not meet it, ridicule, harassment, and even assault are the consequences. This legislation will help spotlight that this type of behavior is not acceptable. Teachers, administrators, and bus drivers already receive this type of additional protection through legislation. We are hopeful that officials will be shown the same courtesy and respect. Twenty-two (22) states already have legislation like this on the books and 17 states, including Ohio, have pending legislation. Protecting officials in Ohio is protecting athletic opportunities for the youth in Ohio. The shortage of officials in all states is a big concern. Ohio lost almost 10% of our officiating numbers during the height of the COVID pandemic. Many have not returned. The #1 reason for not returning is also the #1 reason people don't want to become officials: safety and environment. We do not want game opportunities for our youth in Ohio canceled due to a shortage of officials.

Thank you again for your time and attention today. I would be happy to answer any questions the committee may have.