

My name is Dr. Kate Riffie and it is an honor to write in support of HB492, mandating mental health training for coaches K-12.

I am the wife of a high school coach, the parent of children who competed at the youth, interscholastic, and intercollegiate levels, and a professional who in over 42 years has worked with thousands of student-athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators.

My educational background includes a BS in Physical Education from Ithaca College, an MA in Athletic Administration and a PhD. in Counselor Education, both from The Ohio State University.

Professionally, I spent 35 years employed by Department of Athletics at Ohio State. Most of that time was spent as a Counselor and eventually as the Director of the Student Athlete Support Services Office.

When I was first hired, the majority of my responsibilities involved providing academic support and improvement strategies for the student-athletes. Though a small percentage of the student-athletes came in to OSU with below average academic preparedness, the majority of academic issues I addressed were not a result of the level of preparedness. Poor academic performance was not the issue, it was a symptom of other challenges. Increasing the number of hours at Study Table or requiring more tutoring sessions were going to solve the problem. I decided early in my tenure that it was necessary to address the situation, not the symptoms. That is the main reason I decided to enroll in the Counselor Education program, to learn more about the “why”.

As a result, we made the choice to provide a more wholistic approach to student-athlete support – a more developmental strategy. We focused more on challenges to self-esteem, motivation, stress, anxiety, career direction, substance use, eating disorders, and trauma. Student-athletes were struggling because of what they were going through and how these events impacted how they felt about themselves. With our new approach, and significant collaboration with other support staff (the medical team, sport psychologists, strength/conditioning coaches, and sports nutrition), we began to see more positive growth. Because of the collaborative nature, we began to establish a culture where our outreach was not seen as intrusive and seeking assistance was not only encouraged, but became the norm. Were we 100% successful? Absolutely not, but it was a far cry from where we started.

Unfortunately, this type of support is the exception not the rule in college athletics, and almost non-existent in interscholastic or youth sport.

I retired from Ohio State in 2015, believing it was time to move on and enjoy my life. What I learned very quickly was what I enjoyed in life was working with student-athletes and those who coach and teach them. I decided to become a part-time professor. I have taught at various institutions in Central Ohio – Ohio Dominican University, Otterbein University, and for the last 4 years at Ohio Wesleyan University. My areas of instruction have been related to the management of sport for future administrators and coaches. The courses I teach are Introduction to Sport Management, Advanced Sport Management, Contemporary Issues in Sport, and the Mental Aspects/Psychology of Sport. Staying up to date on the issues impacting sport at every level is critical to each curriculum. Every time I researched material to add to class discussions, the mental health of sport participants is evident. Each semester, I notice that the prominence of mental illness and mental health issues in sport has grown significantly, as well as the instances of attempted and completed suicide. I talk about this topic in every single course I teach. I firmly believe that anyone pursuing a career in any field related to sport must have a keen awareness of

how to recognize and support those who are struggling and those who are not “ok”. If a future coach comes through my classes, they will hear about it and we will talk about it! Young people are not speaking up about how they feel, so we need to have educated and trained professionals who are able to develop connections, recognize, and support those in struggle.

Now, as I write this, I am physically shaking. Yes, intercollegiate athletic programs address and provide support to their student-athletes, but I am tired of reading about and hearing from my former colleagues about student-athletes who end their lives, feeling they had no other choice, no one to talk to about their hopelessness.

If this is happening in colleges, what do you think is happening in youth and high school sports? Coaches are hired, often without any training other than those provided through Lindsey’s Law and basic first aid. The overwhelming majority of coaches are no longer educators, they have no training or awareness of the physical, social, or mental development of their athletes. The stress and pressure from coaches and parents is the number one reason children and young adults quit sport. Yet many coaches still utilize abhorrent methods of motivation. Screaming and yelling a derogatory comment at a player on the field, no intervention when an athlete vomits before every contest, labeling an athlete as fat, stupid, soft, or a “pussy” is not effective coaching. Coaches have no concept of how those comments impact the self-esteem and self-worth of a young person. The onset of depression, stress, anxiety, substance use, eating disorders, and feelings of not being “enough” don’t start in college, they start much earlier. We need to do something at a much earlier stage before we lose more children and young adults.

We don’t need coaches to be therapist, we just need to provide them with the necessary training to recognize the signs and symptoms of mental illness and a basic knowledge of the resources available. When I discuss this important topic with the coaches with whom I interact, they say they “don’t know what to do” – so please help them!

I know through my personal and professional experience that coaches have tremendous hearts, they love what they do and they love the student-athletes they coach. I also know that they are human, and busy, and don’t flock to attend extra workshops and training sessions. They may want to learn more, but won’t unless it is mandated.

I respectfully ask you to take this important opportunity to pass HB492, and make sport an experience of joy and positive growth for the next generation of participants and the coaches who coach them.

Thank you.