



# OHIO HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION

Doug Ute, Executive Director

## Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee OHSAA- General Overview Testimony Tuesday, December 7, 2021

**Doug Ute**  
**Executive Director**

**Kristin Ronai**  
**Director of Compliance**

Thank you, Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the Committee for allowing us, the Ohio High School Athletic Association, commonly known as the OHSAA, to provide this informational testimony about the work our organization does on a daily basis for student-athletes across the state. My name is Doug Ute and I serve as the Executive Director. Prior to this position I worked in schools for over 35 years as a Superintendent, Principal, Athletic Administrator, Teacher and Coach. Most recently I served as the Superintendent of the Newark City School system for 11 years.

Testifying with me today is my colleague, Kristin Ronai, who is our Director of Compliance and Legislative Affairs. Ms. Ronai started with our association in 2011 and currently oversees all student-eligibility issues.

We stand before you today representing the 817-member high schools and 748-member 7-8<sup>th</sup> grade schools who have voluntarily elected to join the OHSAA to take advantage of the benefits that membership in our organization entails. In terms of the number of schools, our organization is the third largest in the country, behind Texas and California, and we are the fourth largest in athletic participation, behind Texas, California and New York. When most people think of the OHSAA, they think of the state championships we offer in our 26 sanctioned sports- 13 girls and 13 boys, for a total of 75 combined divisions. Though we do take great pride in offering some of the best high school state tournaments in the country, I am hopeful our testimony here today shows you that we offer our schools and athletes a much broader range of services throughout the year.

Each year approximately 400,000 student-athletes participate in OHSAA sanctioned sports. This participation is designed to complement a student's school experience and teach them lifelong lessons of hard work and self-discipline. Unlike other forms of competition, which are primarily designed to promote athletic development and showcase the athletic talents of individuals, the education-based athletics structure of the OHSAA is a carefully constructed system that promotes competitive balance and is intended to foster a sense of community.

The genesis of our type of state association began shortly after the civil war when groups of students from different schools began playing sports against one another. At first, the schools wanted no involvement with these activities. But soon, out of necessity, the school leaders began monitoring the activities to ensure there were no fights and to make sure the competitions were fair. Faculty members were eventually assigned to serve as monitors or chaperones and finally the school leaders decided some "controls" were necessary, which is when Ohio schools created the OHSAA in November of 1907. As you can tell from this brief history, the OHSAA is not a creature of statute or a division of the state department of education or some other state agency. Much like your local American Legion chapter, VFW post, or local school conference or league, like the Ohio Capital Conference (OCC) here in Columbus, the OHSAA is a private, not-for-profit, unincorporated association whose members develop basic rules to achieve desirable education-based



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outcomes. The individuals in our office have simply been tasked with enforcing the rules that have been voted into place.

And speaking of voting, it is important to clarify that OHSAA member school principals vote annually on changes to the Constitution and Bylaws each May. If a referendum item receives a majority vote by the schools, then the rule is changed. Our office does not have the authority to change or waive the bylaws the member school principals have voted into place, aside from the recently-implemented, limited discretionary authority they have given us to waive strict compliance with a rule if the non-compliance is a direct and proximate result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe this democratic approach to rule changes allows for our member schools to have the power and authority to create settings which they believe support the mission of education-based athletics.

When looking specifically at our athletic events, we are pleased to report that we were one of very few states around the country to conduct on-time, full sports seasons during the 20-21 school year and we were able to crown a state champion in each of our 26 sports. Our 19-person staff advocated tirelessly to the Ohio Department of Health and the Governor's Office to allow high school sports during the pandemic. Once play had begun, we worked hand-in-hand with them to ensure competitions were being conducted in a safe manner. In states across the country, many associations were not so fortunate and there were no sports played the entire school year, or seasons were greatly modified. We are so proud of the fact that we took the necessary steps to ensure high school sports were able to proceed last year in Ohio, despite the financial impact that decision had on our association. It's important to note that 80% of the OHSAA office's revenue is based on ticket sales from tournaments. Knowing that Ohio was facing greatly reduced venue capacities last year, our staff knew there would be limited revenues earned at our post-season tournaments and that we could likely lose money conducting them; but we elected to move forward with them anyway because we know how important these opportunities are for the health and well-being of our student-athletes.

We also have some of the best officials and coaches who are interacting with our athletes daily. The OHSAA provides certifications for approximately 15,000 officials and requires yearly educational credits for them, including concussion training.

We pride ourselves in the training our coaches undergo before interacting with the athletes, and we are actively working to continually improve and streamline this training. Currently, all coaches, whether paid or volunteer, are required to have a Pupil Activity Permit from ODE, but just earlier this year, we worked in consultation with the OSU LiFEsports Alliance and were one of only two state associations in the country to be awarded a grant from the Susan Crown Exchange, which is a group that supports nonprofits who prepare youth to thrive in our world. Our goal with this grant is to educate 15,000 Ohio coaches in the next three years and arm them with necessary skills to recognize, understand and address a student's socioemotional well-being. We are currently implementing this training in ten districts across the state in all different types of schools- rural and urban, large and small, and we have every expectation to expand this training in the future. We feel very privileged to have been selected to be a part of this effort and are thrilled that the grant covers all funding associated with this important training initiative.

Applying for this grant is just one of the examples of the great care we take to responsibly manage the financial assets of this organization. We operate on a \$20 million budget and receive no government funding on an annual basis. Last year, however, we were grateful to receive a \$2 million grant from the ESSER Funds from Governor DeWine to help with the devastating impact the cancellation of our 2020 winter and spring tournaments had at the beginning of Covid 1.5 years ago, along with the reduced venue capacities



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which were in place at last year's tournaments. As mentioned earlier, the OHSAA office currently has four primary sources of revenue with 80% coming from ticket sales from tournaments and the rest coming from officials dues, corporate sponsorships, and other sources such as the newly-implemented \$50/sport membership dues. Since I was hired, we have begun conducting quarterly financial update meetings with any member schools that choose to take part. In these sessions we provide detailed updates on revenue brought in for each sport and how the money is being spent. We show how we have negotiated responsible site contracts to provide our athletes with the opportunity to continue playing in some of the best facilities in the state, while still carefully managing our expenses.

At this time, I will turn it over to Ms. Ronai to share some brief additional information about a few compliance and student-eligibility issues we believe would be of interest to you.

In addition to the visible tournament experiences we provide for our member schools and their athletes, there are also countless other benefits that traditionally get overlooked with the OHSAA, including the annual catastrophic insurance premium of almost \$500,000 we pay for all our student-athletes in case an unfortunate event transpires while they are participating in interscholastic athletics with their school team. Another benefit we take great pride in is the reassurance that all our member schools are abiding by the same rules. If someone is playing an OHSAA member school, they can be certain that the school is chartered by the Ohio Department of Education or operates in accordance with the Minimum Standards for Non-Chartered Non-Tax Supported Schools. They also know that each member school competes in a minimum of two sports per season, preventing a school from creating a powerhouse academy in any given sport, and that all athletes on these teams are held accountable to the same student-eligibility standards, including meeting academic requirements to play, being the appropriate age for competition against their peers, and that they have maintained amateur status in their sport of play.

One of the best things about these student eligibility standards, however, is that they can and DO change through a vote of the member school principals, as discussed earlier. We are aware that Ohio recently permitted college athletes in our state to earn money for using their name, image, and likeness (NIL) and this is a topic we are actively exploring for a membership vote in May. Our belief is that we still need to protect the OHSAA and the member schools' logos and trademarks, but that if an athlete can earn money for using his/her own name, image, and likeness (NIL) outside of the school, then that this is something we think should be considered. Therefore, we will be proposing some new language to adjust our amateur bylaws to open up some of those additional opportunities for these athletes... and the principals will have the final say on that issue in May 2022 when they vote on the topic. If you ever have an issue like this about which you are concerned, we personally encourage each of you to reach out to our office for clarification and, if needed, we are always open to dialogue to discuss new voting language which could then allow our member school principals to change their rules via their democratic process, if they so desire.

In conclusion, we hope today's presentation has provided a broader view into the scope of influence the Ohio High School Association has on its member schools and student-athletes around this state. At this time, we would be happy to answer any questions you may have.