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Maine Rallies Behind Rules for Athletics

State Initiative Billed as National Model

By John Gehring

Augusta, Maine

Youth athletes increasingly complain about unruly fans, overbearing coaches, and pressures from elite travel teams. In this state, at least, their concerns have been heard.

Superintendents, sports officials, and parents in Maine are rallying behind a major initiative billed as a national model for creating more positive athletic experiences for young people.

More than 400 people from around the state gathered in Augusta earlier this month for the release of "Sports Done Right: A Call to Action on Behalf of Maine's Student-Athletes." The report was written by a panel of principals, athletic directors, and coaches who spent a year studying trends in youth sports and looking for better models to guide school athletic programs.

Backed by a federal grant and endorsed by Maine's governor and commissioner of education, the effort seeks to provide clear frameworks that define how interscholastic sports should be conducted and monitored. Given the prominent role that sports play in shaping students' identity and the atmosphere of high schools, the guidance is sorely needed, observers say. Pep rallies and the pursuit of state championships loom large in defining school culture, even as high schools are under increasing pressure to improve their academic results.

The Maine effort comes as other national groups have warned about disturbing trends in youth athletics. The National Association of State Boards of Education released a report last fall cautioning that a growing number of high school teams are taking on the trappings of big-time college programs. It called on state boards and athletic associations to be more vigilant about questionable recruiting practices, corporate sponsorships, and other influences that could undermine schools' educational missions. ("[H.S. Athletics Out of Bounds, Report Warns](#)," Oct. 27, 2004.).

"We all know there has been excesses and departures from sound practices," said Robert Cobb, the dean of the University of Maine's college of education and a co-director of the university's Sport and Coaching Education Initiative, which received a \$397,000 federal Department of Education grant, secured by U.S. Sen. Susan M. Collins, R-Maine, to lead the project.

"This can slip away from boards and administrators quite easily," Mr. Cobb said of school sports.

Sports Summit

The diverse group here, which includes a past president of the American Medical Association and an Olympic gold medalist in the marathon, met with middle and high school students in small-group discussions during a year of work. The Maine Sports Summit, held last spring as part of the effort, attracted 300 student-athletes from 87 high schools and 24 middle schools.

"We have had hundreds of kids tell us about the good, the bad, and the ugly of their experiences with sports," said Duke Albanese, a former Maine commissioner of education who has played a leading role in the effort. "We want this model to be developed so well that people will want to run their program this way."

Mr. Albanese, a former high school football coach and college athlete, said the sports initiative can be viewed as a complement to Maine's academic standards and the 1998 "Promising Futures" report, the state's seminal report on high school reform.

The "Sports Done Right" report, which will be sent to every school district in the state, is built around seven core principles and "supporting practices" that should guide athletic experiences. The standards include promoting sportsmanship over a win-at-all-cost mentality; increasing opportunities for learning through sports; and holding parents and community members to higher standards of behavior.

The document also features "out of bounds" issues that coaches, parents, and school administrators should avoid. They include "pay to play" policies that require students to pay a fee to participate; imposing a professional or collegiate model on youth athletics; and encouraging students to specialize in one sport.

The goal is to have parents, athletes, school boards, superintendents, and coaches meet locally for discussions about the core principles and ultimately sign "compacts" in which they agree to honor the new standards.

"People want to do right by their kids, but they often don't know how to do it," said John Wolfgram, an English teacher at South Portland High School and an assistant football coach at Bowdoin College who sat on the panel. "This provides a model."

Dan Bowers, the athletic administrator at Cony High School in Augusta, said he welcomes the effort to foster sports programs that are more balanced. Among other concerns, he said, finding coaches has become more challenging as teachers take on greater workloads, and as coaches are treated with less respect by parents and fans.

Most coaches at Cony High and around the state are not teachers—a departure from years past, when student-athletes were more likely to have coaches they saw every day in the classroom.

"I'm constantly filling coaching positions," Mr. Bowers said during a break from the event held to release the report at the Augusta Civic Center. "Teachers' time is limited, and the pay isn't equitable."

Paul Vachon has become one of the state's most successful and well-known girls' varsity basketball coaches over his three-decade coaching career. The Cony High coach also teaches 8th grade English.

"I don't think we're hiring enough teachers who coach," he said. "They go hand and hand. You really have to know the students on both sides of the fence, as students and athletes."

Mr. Vachon also worries about the influence of teams that are organized outside of school. The Amateur Athletic Union, for example, has become one of the nation's most competitive and popular venues for athletes on travel teams looking to showcase their skills to college recruiters in national tournaments.

"I have players now being recruited by AAU coaches," Mr. Vachon said. "Girls will pay as much as \$4,000 to be on AAU teams, and if a coach has 10 players, that's \$40,000. That's more than I make as a teacher. I guess I'm in the wrong profession."

More athletes, he added, feel the pressure to specialize in just one sport year round, a trend he doesn't understand.

"My best team had the field hockey player of the year, the soccer player of the year, and the basketball player of the year," he said. "Give me athletes, and let's go have fun."

Quoting Thoreau

Whether players have fun depends in large part on the attitude of coaches, argues Karen Brown, the director of the Maine Center for Sport and Coaching, which trains coaches in the state and serves as a clearinghouse for resources on coaching.

“One of the major problems students face are the unrealistic pressures coaches put on them,” said Ms. Brown, 24, who was a high school and college athlete in Maine. “Kids are so worried about making mistakes they can’t enjoy competition. Coaches feel the pressure of the community, and the kids get the brunt of that.”

At Greely High School in Cumberland, Maine, about 70 percent of the 687 students play a sport. Last year, the school won three state championships. That was also the year the school held its first sports pep rally—which opened with a student-athlete quoting Henry David Thoreau.

“That symbolizes the way we maintain a healthy balance here,” said Chris Mosca, the principal. “Sports doesn’t drive what we do.”

Wayne Fordham, the assistant principal, used to work in a Nebraska high school where the football team defined the school’s sense of identity. By contrast, he said, Greely High has worked hard to make sports blend in with other extracurricular activities, such as drama. Administrators also take pains to highlight academic achievement.

“We don’t have your football jocks parading around like kings,” Mr. Fordham said. Rachele Doucette and Greg Frost, both 17-year-old juniors at Greely, agree that their involvement in school sports is becoming more intense as they distinguish themselves on the school’s basketball and soccer teams. They also play “premier soccer” outside of school and hope to win college scholarships for athletics.

Mr. Frost said his travel-team coach told him he had to choose between the travel team and his school team. But Mr. Frost, who still plays some travel sports, chose to compete on his school team because he enjoys playing with his school friends. He has resisted pressures to specialize in just soccer.

For her part, Ms. Doucette says that despite the pressures, she can’t imagine school without playing sports.

“The team bonding is great,” she said. “The relationships you build are awesome.”

Sports Done Right

A panel of Maine principals, coaches, and athletic directors is pushing for schools and communities to sign on to “compacts” built around these and other principles and practices:

- Schools should do periodic assessments of the core principles in the panel’s report, which include increasing learning opportunities through sports and establishing a value-based athletic philosophy that is written school board policy.
- Schools should increase their offerings of nontraditional sports, such as skateboarding, mountain biking, and outdoor recreation, with the goal of having all students participate in extracurricular activities.
- Communities should regularly review recreation programs for opportunities both to broaden healthy participation and prevent the growth of a “class system” in sports.
- Maine school leaders will encourage the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, a regional accrediting agency, to include the report’s core practices as part of accreditation.
- Compensation for coaches should be tied to their levels of training and certification.

SOURCE: “Sports Done Right,” 2005

For More Info

More information on ["Sports Done Right: A Call to Action on Behalf of Maine’s Student-Athletes"](#) is available online from the [Maine Center for Sport and Coaching](#).

