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State association orders 2-year reduction in number of games

Cutbacks to curtail school sports seasons

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NEWS STAFF REPORTER

High school sports are going to be taking one for the team.

With the recession in full swing and school districts statewide dealing with steep budget cuts, the organization that oversees public high school athletics for New York State has voted to trim the number of games played in a season for nearly all athletic programs.

The move, which would affect all Buffalo-area public high schools, is designed to reduce costs across the board without prompting districts to get rid of some of their smaller athletic programs.

Catholic schools and other private schools are not affected by the decision.

Nina Van Erk, executive director of the New York State Public High School Athletic Association, said reducing the number of games could save upward of \$10 million statewide, including almost \$6 million in officiating fees alone.

“The association wanted to take a proactive measure to provide a uniform approach,” Van Erk told The Buffalo News on Tuesday.

She added that the association’s representatives voted on the measure “to assist school districts in reducing costs and expenditures within their athletic budgets in an attempt to save the integrity of the entire program.”

In addition, the decision, which affects both boys and girls sports, avoids violating any provisions of the 1972 federal Title IX law, which prohibits discrimination in education spending based on gender.

This is how the cuts would work: Van Erk’s organization, a nonprofit that is not part of state government, is cutting the maximum number of regular-season games played per season per sport.

Baseball and softball, for instance, would go from 24 regular- season games to 20. Basketball would go from 20 to 18. Football would go from 10 to nine or eight. (Football teams in Western New York’s public schools played

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seven regular season games last season before some got into the playoffs.)

The changes, which were approved by a slim majority late last month, would begin in the next school year and would remain in effect for two years, Van Erk said.

Some sports, including cross country, tennis, bowling, golf and skiing, will not be affected by the decision.

Western New York athletic directors, whose representatives voted against taking the action, were disappointed by the decision.

"I don't think we should be worried about funding school budgets on the backs of the kids playing sports," said David Thomas, athletic director for the Buffalo Public Schools.

Cutting the number of games might help school districts in the more remote areas of Western New York that require longer traveling distances, Thomas said, "but it doesn't save it up here [in Buffalo], where we are trying to keep the kids off the streets and busy with school and athletics."

The current schedule allows Buffalo athletes the opportunity to play in suburban areas and "to travel to some nice tournaments," Thomas said. "Now we have to pull back on that."

Thomas also questioned whether the cuts were really temporary. "When they take things away," he said, "they don't often come back."

A meeting of local athletic directors is scheduled for to day in West Seneca, where the topic is expected to be taken up, Thomas said.

Many local athletic directors said they felt that the decision should have been left up to the schools or school districts.

Greg Kaszubski, athletic director at Clarence High School, said he is disappointed that the association chose to cut the number of games "as a first resort, mainly because I feel the competitive side of sports is one of the foundations."

He continued: "The kids practice an awful long time for the season, but I also understand it from the state's perspective. It's even across the board."

Brett Banker, athletic director for the Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda School District, said the association's action will cut 232 athletic contests for Ken-Ton during the next two years.

The word among fellow athletic directors is that the decision will be appealed, he said.

"People are crafting a reaction," he told the School Board on Tuesday.

In trying to explain the athletic association's decision, School Superintendent Mark P. Mondanaro said: "Their philosophy was they didn't want districts losing sports."

Fred Thornley, athletic director at East Aurora, said cutting the number of games isn't necessarily "a bad idea in the interest of trimming costs."

But most athletic directors and coaches would prefer to find other ways to save money, such as buying less equipment. "Don't get a brand-new bat or something like that," he said, "but not decrease any games."

Pete Pannes, athletic director at Maple Grove High, whose football team won a state championship in November, said reducing the number of games would hurt student athletes.

“Any time we reduce games, it’s detrimental,” he said.

The students were “disappointed” by the news, Pannes said, particularly because the cuts mean that his teams will no longer be playing neighboring schools because Maple Grove is in a different league from most of them.

Dave Carson, athletic director at Barker High School, said many of his sports already compete in fewer than the maximum number of games. They also would probably have made the decision to cut games next year, anyway, he said.

“We all know we have to make cuts,” Carson said. “It may be games for one athletic director. It may be equipment and supplies for another. It may be reduction of contractual services, like a trainer, for another.”

But, he said, “I prefer for those decisions to be made at the local level.”

Trimming the number of games to save money is not a new idea. A school district outside Cleveland met Monday to discuss dropping all sports, though the school board in suburban Richmond Heights delayed its vote until April. Oklahoma schools shortened seasons early in this decade to save money.

Mississippi last year voted to cut schedules by 10 percent — except for the beloved money-maker, football. Schools in Idaho are considering a reduction, though officials there noted that there is some opposition. And while a season-reducing proposal was rejected in Maine last month, officials set rules that will result in fewer teams qualifying for playoffs.

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