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THE BUFFALO NEWS

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Girls ice hockey is on Williamsville schools' to-do list

Athletic director hopes to prod other districts

By Sandra Tan
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Despite the tough economy, the Williamsville Central School District is renewing its desire to field pink jerseys on the ice.

Last year was the first time the district tried to get a single girls varsity ice hockey team started at the high school level. That effort failed, not for lack of willingness or interest, but for lack of local competition.

Yet hope springs eternal. At Tuesday night's School Board meeting, Superintendent Howard Smith listed girls ice hockey as a potential new athletic offering for the 2009-10 school year.

The Williamsville district has been a pioneer among Western New York public schools in advancing ice hockey opportunities for boys, and now girls.

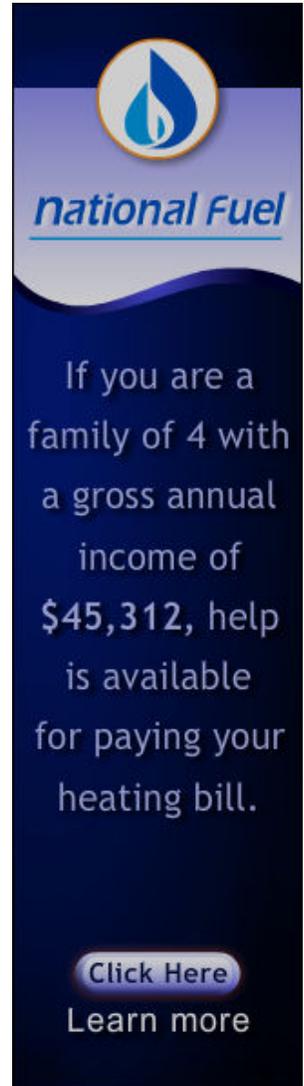
The only high school in the region that currently sponsors a girls team is Nichols, a private school. Nichols started a girls varsity team in 1995 and has remained the first and only school in Western New York to field a female team.

Dr. Jim Russin, the district's athletic director, is hosting a meeting with about half a dozen other area school district representatives Thursday to see if other districts in the region might be willing to start up their own varsity programs next year.

"What that level of interest is, and whether they're ready to field a competitive varsity team is what that conversation is going to be about," Smith told the board Tuesday.

He also cautioned, "I have not had information that leads me to believe that there are a significant number of [districts] that will be ready to field a competitive varsity team next year."

Parents and students have been clamoring for a girls hockey team for several years in Williamsville. But increasingly, other area school districts facing pressure to throw a girls helmet in the rink.




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Parents and female hockey players in West Seneca and Lancaster petitioned their school districts for a girls varsity team in October.

And on Tuesday, a “hockey dad” asked the Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda School Board to consider implementing a varsity ice hockey program for girls.

William Pavone, whose daughter is a freshman at Kenmore West High School, is active with the Great Lakes Girls Hockey League. Girls hockey is growing in the Northeast, he said, along with increasing opportunities for college scholarship and future employment.

“If you don’t act . . . we’ll get behind the eight-ball,” Pavone said. “All things need a starting point; I say let’s start now.”

Brett Banker, the Ken-Ton district’s supervisor of physical education, recreation and athletics, reportedly plans to attend Thursday’s meeting in Williamsville. Representatives from West Seneca, Lancaster, Amherst, Clarence, Orchard Park and others also have been invited.

If these school districts were to form teams, they would likely join the New York State Girls Varsity Ice Hockey League, which currently consists of teams based entirely in the East and Northeast end of the state.

The closest teams to the Buffalo Niagara region are at least a three-hour bus ride away.

Smith said Tuesday that if enough competition could be found, the district could set aside \$26,350 in its 2009-10 budget to support a new team and cover the costs of coaching stipends, practice and game ice time, officiating costs, uniforms and transportation.

In other news, the Williamsville board:

- Discussed the possibility of introducing a class of Mandarin Chinese at each of the district’s three high schools in response to ongoing parent and student interest.
- Reviewed the potential to add six modified volleyball teams — three boys teams and three girls teams — for seventh-and eighth-graders. The district currently offers no modified volleyball teams.

News Staff Reporter Janice Habuda contributed to this report.

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