

Good Morning,

My name is William Hall and I am currently the Superintendent of the Millcreek Township School District in Erie, Pennsylvania. I am here today representing our PIAA Equity Steering Committee as well as over 350 public school districts across the Commonwealth who have indicated a desire to see the separation of PIAA playoff competition into two categories: Traditional public (or “boundary”) schools and Private/Charter (non-boundary) “schools of choice.” Thank you for giving us the opportunity to have our voices heard on this critically important issue.

At the previous PIAA Oversight Committee hearing on June 18, 2018, there was a comment from one of the committee members stating that the PIAA boundary vs. non-boundary issue was the hottest topic in Harrisburg. You can be assured that this topic, as well other related topics such as athletic transfers and inconsistent PIAA governance, has been questioned and unsuccessfully challenged for many years. Specifically regarding this topic of separating boundary and non-boundary schools for playoffs, we have consistently been given the following three responses from the PIAA:

1. “No.”
2. “It is a legislative issue and we will not go against the legislature.”
3. “House Bill 2104 of 1972 does not allow us to do this.”

This steadfast refusal to respond to our request for change is the latest indicator of what, we feel, is a significant disconnect between Dr. Lombardi, the PIAA’s 32-member governing Board, and the traditional 500 public school districts that they are appointed to represent. Feeling even more frustrated and disappointed after hearing Dr. Lombardi’s position and testimony back in June, we were left with no other recourse than to create a PIAA Equity Steering Committee and begin a unified effort to address our chronic concerns.

On July 24, our Steering Committee held a PIAA Equity Summit meeting in State College. At this historic meeting, over 140 Districts agreed that a separate playoff structure is not only legal, but it is also necessary to accomplish what we all need: Fair and equitable PIAA playoff competition at every level. We do not agree with the PIAA that House Bill 2104 of 1972 prohibits them from creating a separate state tournament structure. Nonetheless, that continues to be their answer. We also do not believe, as the PIAA has stated publicly, that this is a legislative issue. We are not asking to have private schools excluded from PIAA playoff competition. We are merely requesting that those schools play each other during the PIAA playoff tournament. Every legal interpretation we have solicited disagrees with the PIAA’s response and current position on this topic. At the conclusion of my testimony, you will hear briefly from Attorney Larry Kelly who will address this specific topic in more detail.

Today, we are providing you a packet of materials that were shared, discussed, and agreed upon during our PIAA Equity Summit meeting in July. If I could direct you to the packet’s table of contents, you will see that we have provided you the following information:

1. Documents compiled from our PIAA Equity Summit, held earlier this summer in State College, PA
2. A seven-year summary of PIAA champions and runners up in football, basketball and soccer
3. The completed brackets for girls and boys basketball from last season's tournament
4. A three-year PIAA fact sheet regarding margins of championship contests involving boundary and non-boundary schools
5. Results of last week's survey of "traditional public school districts" on the topic of separate PIAA playoff competition
6. A request for a statistical analysis to be conducted by the PIAA
7. Documents pertaining to House 2104 of 1972

In his August 8th, 2018 op-ed, Senator Scarnati suggested that "the PIAA should take a closer look at these claims to ensure every school, team, and athlete receives a fair shake." The PIAA Equity Steering Committee strongly agrees. At this time, I would ask that you turn to pages 14 and 15 for a more vivid representation of the obvious issue, and that is that private and charter schools of choice have built powerhouse athletic programs that dominate traditional public schools. These two pages show the PIAA basketball state champions and runners up for the past seven years. A more vivid representation of this competitive imbalance can be found on pages 18, 19, 20, 26, and 27, where you will see the completed PIAA basketball brackets for last year. There are several other examples showing the recent trend of private and charter school playoff dominance in your packet.

To make matters worse, the PIAA's recent adoption of a "Competitive Classification" formula will only ensure the continuation of private/charter school dominance of playoff competition. It will simply move the powerhouse athletic programs out of the lower classifications and into the upper classifications. In our opinion, this is simply kicking the athletic equity down the road for several more years. Dr. Lombardi has stated that the year 2020/21 would be the earliest that this formula could be implemented. Until then, traditional public school districts must sit and continue to watch the exodus of their finest student athletes, who are leaving our traditional public schools and heading into the recruiting arms of private and charter "schools of choice." While we are encouraged that the PIAA feels that this is "movement in the right direction," we believe otherwise.

We believe that a separate playoff system will go a long way to address PIAA's inconsistent handling of athletic transfers. Even with PIAA's recent adoption of stricter transfer rules, many student-athletes will essentially be punished depending on the timing of their transfer. Most schools would be more likely to approve student transfers as long as these private and charter schools would be playing each other in playoffs. This would also significantly reduce the need for transfer appeal hearings. These inconsistent appeal hearings and decisions already contribute to an unhealthy community environment that pits local students, parents, school administrators, and local lawyers against each other. Regular season schedules could remain intact, and rivalry competitions between boundary and non-boundary schools could (and should) continue.

The PIAA previously discussed the development of a seventh classification. Why could this not be the classification for all private and charter schools of choice? On the bottom of page three in your packet, we have proposed two potential scenarios that would accomplish our goal of fair play and equity in the PIAA playoff tournament. We believe either scenario could work as early as next year.

Finally, in preparation for our testimony today, our Steering Committee sent a one-question survey to all 500 traditional public school district superintendents in the Commonwealth. The question was: *“Do you support the separation of PIAA playoffs for boundary (traditional public) schools and non-boundary (private/charter) schools?”* **A total of 325 “traditional public school districts” responded, and 94% said yes, we want a separate playoff system.** It is important to note that these responses were received after the PIAA announced their recent changes to address the competitive equity. In their news release outlining these changes, the PIAA also stated the following: “While some have proposed separate public and private tournaments, the Board of Directors firmly believes that segregation is not the answer.” This is not about segregation, and to suggest that any of us are asking for segregation is an insult. It is also an insult to be labelled “rogue superintendents” when we are making credible efforts on behalf of our Districts’ student-athletes. As you can see by the numbers and data presented to you today, we need change. We also recommend that a statistical analysis be conducted to more accurately reflect the seriousness of the issue at hand. A copy of this request is on page 45 of your packet. For this to happen, we are asking for your help in compelling the PIAA to quit misinterpreting the law and to begin abiding by the wishes of its membership.

Thank you.

Now, I would like to introduce Mr. Larry Kelly who will speak on behalf of our committee regarding House Bill 2104 of 1972.