



Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association

P. O. BOX 319 • 3333 LEBANON ROAD • HERMITAGE, TENNESSEE 37076
615/889-6740 • Fax 615/889-0544 • www.tssaa.org

August 25, 2020

Dr. Joris M. Ray
Superintendent
Shelby County Schools
160 S. Hollywood Street
Memphis, TN 38112

Dear Dr. Ray:

TSSAA received your August 24, 2020, letter. The letter addresses some matters that remain in litigation and about which TSSAA will not comment, nor will TSSAA dignify with a response the wholly unwarranted assertion that TSSAA has been inattentive to equity and the impact of its rules on students of color. However, TSSAA does want to respond to the criticism of its regulations and guidelines for returning to interscholastic athletic competition. That criticism is unfounded and is based on mistaken assumptions of the underlying facts.

The suggestion that TSSAA's regulations and guidelines lacked scientific support is ill-informed. TSSAA developed its COVID-19 return-to-play regulations and guidelines with extensive input from the physician members of TSSAA's Sports Medicine Advisory Committee. TSSAA also relied on information from the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), the leading authority on high school athletics across America and a clearinghouse for best practices in high school sports. As a member of the NFHS, TSSAA has access to and made use of return-to-play guidance developed by the NFHS's own Sports Medicine Advisory Committee, a 15-member committee that includes nationally renowned medical doctors and research specialists. TSSAA took into account data and standards from the Centers for Disease Control, the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee, and the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine. TSSAA also gathered input from numerous sister associations in other states. TSSAA worked closely with Governor Bill Lee's administration, which had the benefit of expert input from both state and national sources. Based on currently available information from a wide array of resources, TSSAA believes its regulations and guidelines represent "best practices" for a return to athletic competition at the secondary school level.

The letter also asserts that the TSSAA protocols fail to account for the varying COVID-19 statistics among counties in Tennessee. The opposite is true. TSSAA establishes "minimum" rules for its member schools. TSSAA's COVID-19 regulations and guidelines remind member schools to consult with their local health professionals and to implement more restrictive measures if warranted by local concerns. That has been done in some instances. Some schools like those in the Shelby County Schools have paused or delayed participation in athletic activities


based on local conditions. However, TSSAA does not believe those local judgments should be forced upon other school systems that have reached a different conclusion, particularly in locales where the COVID-19 outbreak is less widespread. The TSSAA regulations and guidelines give schools an opportunity to play if they so desire, but the ultimate decision about whether to do so and whether to implement additional safety measures is left to local school officials.

The suggestion that TSSAA has “failed to prioritize the health and safety of children” is simply incorrect. Earlier this summer the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health conducted a nationwide survey in which it was found that reported feelings of anxiety and depression among student-athletes was up 37 percent from past research studies, and physical activity levels were down 50 percent. In addition, it is well known that sports can be a valuable tool in preventing some at-risk students from dropping out of school; and a 2012 University of Michigan study showed that increases in high school sports participation rates led to a decrease in serious juvenile crime and school suspensions. Finding a way for student-athletes to return to competition has involved trying to balance physical health concerns related to COVID-19 with mental health and educational concerns that relate to not having sports.

Finally, the letter suggests various TSSAA rule changes completely unrelated to COVID-19. TSSAA is a voluntary association of more than 430 member secondary schools. The member schools develop their own rules through an elected representative body called the Legislative Council. The member schools have established their own rules for competition in this fashion for nearly a century. If the member schools in the Shelby County Schools want to propose changes to TSSAA rules, the TSSAA Constitution provides an established method for them to do so. A vague demand which leaves it to others to try to fashion language that will satisfy that demand, coupled with a veiled threat to withdraw from TSSAA, is not the way to accomplish change.

Since the August 24 letter was released to media outlets and posted on social media as a one-sided indictment of TSSAA before we had any opportunity to respond, we will be distributing this response to media outlets and posting it on social media as well. In the future, should you have questions related to TSSAA, please feel free to call me.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bernard Childress". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Bernard" and last name "Childress" clearly distinguishable.

Bernard Childress
Executive Director