



Georgia Will Hold Separate Playoffs for Public, Private Schools

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GHSA splits Class A, avoids defections

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Separate playoffs will be held in all sports, beginning in fall.

MACON --- The landscape of high school athletics in Georgia took an unprecedented turn Tuesday when the executive committee of the Georgia High School Association voted overwhelmingly to hold separate public school and private school playoffs and championships in all Class A sports, beginning this fall.

The resolution, which was introduced by Charlton County High School athletic director Jesse Crews, passed by a vote of 37-12, with one abstention. The result will be two 16-team tournaments --- one for public schools and one for private schools --- that should keep more than 30 of Georgia's smaller high schools from leaving the GHSA and forming their own sports league. Representatives from those schools believed there has been a competitive imbalance between public and private schools at the Class A level because of private schools' ability to accept any student without geographic restriction.

The GHSA's recently approved region assignments will remain in place because they were approved before Tuesday's vote, which means public and private schools will continue to compete against each other during the regular season.

GHSA officials said they will meet with various members in coming months as they determine the seeding process for the 16-team brackets. Ralph Swearngin, executive director of the GHSA, said the process will be developed by the schools that are directly impacted by the vote, with a March timeline.

"I think we have enough good minds [within the GHSA] to figure it out," Swearngin said.

Tuesday's vote apparently ends the movement to create the Georgia Public Schools Association. A group representing that idea, which was attracting interest from more than 40 small, mostly rural schools, held its last meeting Monday. More than 83 representatives present for Tuesday's vote were asked to cast ballots by Jan. 24 on what their schools planned to do in response to whatever decision the GHSA made Tuesday. The choices were either to commit to pull out of the GHSA and join the GPSA, stay in the GHSA or remain undecided.

Wilcox County principal Chad Davis, a leader in the GPSA movement, was prepared to vote for seceding from the GHSA. He seemed relieved that his school will not have to.

"I don't think that there is the need for [the GPSA] now," Davis said. "That's my personal opinion, but we're going to

check with other schools that were involved in the process in the next few weeks.

"I'm very surprised by the [GHSA] vote," he said. "I didn't think they would do anything."

Judging by the three-to-one margin of the vote and pleas from several executive-committee members to preserve the current membership makeup of the GHSA, it appears as if the GPSA movement had a significant impact.

"I don't think of this as a victory," Davis said. "I'm just pleased."

"[The vote] was a little stronger than I thought it would be," Swearngin said. "I think there are a variety of reasons why people voted how they did. I think the pleas for unity being in the best interest of everyone was a factor."

One such vote came from Albert "Pat" Blenke, a Georgia Department of Education administrator who sits on the GHSA executive committee. During the meeting, he said: "This is one of the biggest decisions we have to make as an organization. Eventually, the state legislators are going to get tired of hearing the complaints from their constituents, and they will do something. And as sure as I'm standing here, whatever they do will not be beneficial to the schools.

"A house divided against itself cannot stand," Blenke said.

After the vote, he added, "Every decision you make is going to have unintended consequences."

Others expressed concern over the vote as well.

"Our biggest thing is we feel the GHSA is one of the top four high school associations in the nation, and I think we just made ourselves weaker. The best should play the best," said Eagle's Landing Christian Academy athletic director Scott Queen, who voted no. "We want to compete against the Lincoln Counties and the Clinch Counties, even though we haven't beaten them yet. I just think this is going to be very hard to pull off."

Buford athletic director Dexter Wood cast a "no" vote as well, which was aimed at the process more than the resolution.

"My chief point of contention is that as an executive-committee member, we're seeing this [proposal] for the first time and we're being asked to make such a huge decision," Wood said. "I would like to have had more time."

Wood also is concerned that the next "target" will be single-city school districts with one high school, such as Buford and Calhoun. Those schools have begun to come under fire for their ability to attract students from outside their districts and allow them to enroll for a minimal amount of tuition --- usually around \$200 per month.

"It seems to be that the time has come where we are trying to level the playing field everywhere, and that's such a relative matter," Wood said. "There are definite differences between private schools and a city high school."

Staff writer Michael Carvell contributed to this article.

The story so far

What they did: The GHSA's executive committee voted 37-12 in favor of holding separate playoffs and championships in Class A for private and public schools.

Why they did it: More than 30 Class A public schools considered leaving the GHSA to form their own league because they believed there was a competitive imbalance between private and public schools at the Class A level. Tuesday's vote likely ended the threat.

How it will work: Beginning next season, Class A's private and public schools will play in regions together during the regular season, then have separate 16-team tournaments for the playoffs in all sports. The GHSA will meet again to determine how to seed each 16-team bracket.

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