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## Law would require hiring trainers

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Becton's Athletic Director Jim Bononno recalls playing a crossover football game against Emerson in 2004 when one of their players was complaining of stomach pains. The team's trainer was able to identify by the symptoms and that it was something serious. The trainer ordered the student to the hospital. It turned out to be a ruptured spleen. If they were without the trainer, the outcome may have been different.



STAFF PHOTO/JAIME WINTERS

Scenarios like this aren't rare. A Kentucky football coach was acquitted two weeks ago in a reckless homicide case. He was charged after one of his football players died following heat exhaustion. There was no athletic trainer on site during that practice to assess the tell-tale signs of heat exhaustion.

"Many high school coaches do a great job inspiring their kids and teaching them the principles of the game, but they don't necessarily have the medical training needed to see the warning signs of heat stroke or minor concussions," said State Senator Paul Sarlo.

He plans to introduce a bill in the legislature this fall that will require every high school in New Jersey to have an athletic trainer on staff, something that is recommended, but not mandated by the state's high school sports governing body, the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA). "Our kids' safety should be of the utmost importance when they participate in high school athletics," Sarlo said.

Of the six local South Bergenite coverage area high schools, both private and public, only half employ a full-time trainer; those being Rutherford, Lyndhurst and St. Mary. North Arlington is without full-time trainers, despite having a full roster of high school sports in every season. Until this fall, Becton was without one as well. The school just hired a part-time trainer that was an extra expenditure built into the school budget that was approved in the spring. This is the first year for St. Mary employing a full-time trainer. Queen of Peace High School Athletic Director John Ahmuty said the school has a coach that is a certified athletic trainer, available should a situation arise. North Arlington relies on a mixture of freelance EMTs, physicians and the coaches themselves to assess injury on game day. Practices are supervised by coaches. All New Jersey high school coaches must be CPR and sports first aid certified.

For the schools without a trainer, it essentially comes to finances. North Arlington has in recent years asked residents through a school budget proposal for extra funds to employ a trainer, but it ultimately was defeated. The average annual salary for a high school athletic trainer is just over \$61,300, according to a recent survey conducted by the Athletic Trainers' Society of New Jersey.

In North Arlington, the defeated second budget question proposed for the 2007-08 budget asked for just over \$109,000 in combination for an athletic trainer and school nurse. "Obviously we want one. There is definitely a need for an athletic trainer, but it just hasn't happened yet at North Arlington," said Athletic Director Damon Placenti. "It does put extra responsibilities on our coaching staff."

Placenti said for football, a sport where athletes are most prone to serious injury, the school hires a doctor and has an EMT on site for varsity games and does have a certified athletic trainer on site for junior varsity games. "The point is they're certified. I mean they would be able to identify an injury and in the event of it, they are able to deal with a range of different injuries," Placenti said.

Matt Stone, St. Mary's athletic director, said it's hard to fill a position that commands a generous salary when most parochial schools are battling to survive financially. He said he luckily had an alumnus come back and take the position.

"I understand the intentions of the bill, but it's a wide scope. How can you say to a school where much of its staff doesn't even make \$50,000 that you have to employ an athletic trainer making more than that?" said Stone. "I'm for the idea; we are finally fortunate to have someone dedicated enough to take the job, but I don't agree with forcing it on schools."

Rutherford Athletic Director David Frazier always remembers a trainer being either on staff or through contract with the district through a service as was the case when he went to Rutherford High in the 1980s. The current athletic trainer, Sharon Lopaty, has been on staff since 2001 and as of last year made \$77,000.

"They see injuries all the time and if it's not assessing them and treating them, then their value is extremely

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important in following doctor's orders on a rehabilitation plan. You can't substitute that," said Frazier.

At Becton, the district is starting small with a part-time position because of budget constraints, said Bononno. The trainer starts her day when athletics begin in the afternoon. "You have to crawl before you walk," said Bononno.

"It put a tremendous amount of pressure and liability on me and my coaching staff," he said. "She [the new trainer] has been properly trained for caring for kids that get hurt, evaluating injuries and even small things like taping. We are not trained to identify serious injuries."

In Lyndhurst, athletic trainer Tom Thomas has been employed by the district since 2005. According to Athletic Director Frank "Butch" Servideo, Thomas' services are used not only on the field, but off as well. Thomas replaced a part-time trainer who was also a physical education and health teacher. Thomas has instituted health management programs that have been the first in New Jersey, including a brain injury screening program. Every athlete must undergo the screening before participation in sports and if they suffer a head injury, must undergo the screening again. If the results are not the same, they are not permitted back on the field or courts.

"It's about being proactive in care. He's not only a trainer, he brings expertise, he rehabilitates and gets athletes back on the field sooner, but only if they're cleared by him," said Servideo. "It's boggled my mind over the years how these schools get away with it [not employing a trainer]; it's like a lawsuit waiting to happen."

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