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School choice the rage in Florida, so this education-related bill should pass | Opinion



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One size fits all.

Those four words should never be uttered when it comes to our children's education. After all, children in the same class have varied learning styles, learn at different paces and have their own unique talents.

It's one reason school choice is so important. What's good for Johnny might not be good for Jane.

Some public school districts get it; they've created special programs at schools to serve students with varied interests and skills. Home, charter and private schooling offer different options — in the classroom and in extracurricular activities.

Which brings me to a week when I learned about Florida legislation that could provide choices to school administrators and parents.

The same week I watched part of a College Football Championship game, where Georgia blew out TCU, 65-7. A few days later I officiated three high school championship soccer games, including two that ended in ties and were decided by penalty kicks.

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Parity a wonderful thing to watch

On the field, the top division of the Sunshine State Athletic Conference boys tournament at St. Edward's School in Vero Beach, won by Orlando's Faith Christian Academy, was parity personified. Any of the four teams could have won.

I doubt any of the players will end up playing in a game with stakes as high as Georgia-TCU, but the competitiveness, intensity and teamwork the high school players showed was great to watch.

Win or lose, players had to learn valuable life lessons about dealing with pressure and adversity, making quick decisions, and living with the consequences.

Those lessons, and many more, are what sports are about. For some students, schools are the only places they can have such experiences.

Last weekend they were made possible by the SSAC, formed in 2008 by eight small private schools that wanted to field football teams and play like-minded schools.

Instead of using the Florida High School Athletic Association model of creating districts by school population and region, the smaller SSAC formed divisions toward the end of the season designed to create the best competition possible.

That's relatively easy when only 24 teams played for the SSAC boys soccer title.

The "best" four teams, based on an array of metrics, from record to strength of schedule, played at St. Edward's for the 6A title. Elsewhere, the "worst" four played for the 1A title, with other groups of four facing off in other division championships.

Scores proved there was parity: 39% of 23 games, including consolation matches, were tied and went to penalty kicks; 83% of games ended with margins of two goals or fewer.

"These kids all left with a positive athletic experience," said Stuart Weiss, SSAC president, noting one goal is to help students become "the best they can be" and "overachieve."

That's possible, he said, when a group of similar schools, many with ethics and values as part of their mission statements, agrees to "play by the rules" in what he calls "competition without compromise."

In other words, you field a team — even a football squad with 30 or fewer players — with the "kids who come in the door" to school.

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Values important to this conference

"We have zero tolerance for cheaters," he said.

That's relatively easy to do when you have a membership of about 150 schools, mostly smaller private and charter schools with special needs. Contrast that with the FHSAA, the state's only authorized governing body, with 800 schools.

A smaller group like the SSAC also can be nimble and innovative, such as in its playoff format.

For example, Greg Zugrave, athletic director at St. Edward's, said he hopes to experiment with a shot clock in basketball under the auspices of the SSAC.

And the SSAC has provided a way for small schools to participate in sports the FHSAA has not sanctioned, such as eight-man football and beach volleyball.

Again, it's about creating fun, memorable and challenging experiences for students.

That doesn't happen for many when one or two teams — public or private — win the same district over and over again. Or others get blown out game after game.

"Winning is not the only thing," said Weiss, noting the "opportunity to compete" is important, too.

The opportunity to focus on schools with special needs is what has led to legislation that would allow other athletic associations, not just the FHSAA, to serve students at all schools.

The idea, Weiss said, is to give schools more choices. Schools, whether public with 2,500 students or private with 200 students, should have the right to choose which athletic association serves them best for each individual sport.

"I'm not anti-FHSAA," he said. "I'm just pro-choice. It's about giving people the ability to choose."

House Bill 225, introduced by Rep. Fred Hawkins, R-St. Cloud, would do just that. It also would allow each school, during championship contests, to offer its own "brief opening remarks" on the public address system that the sanctioning body could not censor.

Thus, schools, particularly religious ones, theoretically would be allowed to offer voluntary prayers before championship games on their campuses.

Which gets back to choice. Isn't that what Florida — and its education community — is all about?

After all, one size does not fit all.

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