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Schimminger
Bee Column

New School Year Means New Changes Aimed to Better Protect Students

Two laws enacted during the 2010 and 2011 Legislative Sessions have gone into effect as of July 1, 2012, and the changes in state law will be seen in schools this September.

Student athletes and coaches are to adhere to the Concussion Management and Awareness Act this coming sports season, which now requires a student who is suspected of suffering a concussion to be immediately removed from play and kept from returning to the activity until he or she is symptom-free for a minimum of 24 hours and has been evaluated and given authorization to return to physical activities by a doctor.

The long-term effects that a concussion can have on a person have just recently come to light through increased awareness by professional sports organizations such as the NFL, which has funded medical research on the effects of repeat concussions. Studies have shown that athletes who have suffered from concussions may experience long-term ailments, such as memory disorders, an increased likelihood of early onset dementia and chronic traumatic encephalopathy, which is a progressive degenerative disease.

Symptoms of a concussion include headache, sensitivity to light and noise, nausea and vomiting, fatigue, blurred vision, memory loss and depression. Children and teenagers are more susceptible to concussions and often take longer to recover. Youths are also at a higher risk for second-impact syndrome, which is a potentially fatal injury, in which the brain swells rapidly after a person suffers a second concussion before symptoms from an earlier one have subsided.

The new state guidelines recommend a gradual process for returning students to play after suffering a concussion. The student can move on to the next phase after a 24 hour period of no concussion symptoms. Phase 1 includes low impact, non-strenuous, light aerobic activity such as walking or riding a stationary bike. Phase 2 increases activity to include moderate aerobic activity such as running or jumping rope. Phase 3 allows for sport-specific non-contact training, such as low resistance weight training with a spotter. Phase 4 increases activity to include higher resistance weight training with a spotter. At phase 5 the student athlete can begin full contact training drills and intense aerobic activity, and finally, phase 6 allows the student to return to full activities with no restrictions.

Also implemented this school year will be the Dignity for All Students Act, which requires school districts to implement policies and guidelines that are intended to create a school environment that is free from discrimination and harassment. School training programs have been created to discourage students from discriminating against and

harassing other young scholars. At least one staff member at each school is now required to attend an intensive training program to become the school's designated contact for handling bullying. He or she will be trained to recognize and respond effectively to harassment and bullying, and implement strategies to prevent it.

This past 2012 Legislative Session, we expanded the Dignity for All Students Act to include cyberbullying attacks. This measure, which takes effect next year on July 1, 2013, will require schools to promptly investigate reports of students bullied through electronic means such as email, electronic messaging, and/or social networking sites. The new law includes a school response to incidents that occur off school campus, which causes the bullied student to fear for his or her safety, interfere with his or her mental or emotional health or interfere with school performance. Districts will have to identify an official responsible for receiving bullying reports, establish a mechanism for parents and students to report bullying, and require school staff who witness an incident to report to the designated official within one school day and in writing within three days.

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