

NJSIAA Student Athlete Advisory Council pushes for more balance

Written by NJSIAA Student Ambassadors

After the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA) convened a Student Athlete Advisory Council (SAAC) earlier this school year, New Jersey's 283,000 student athletes now have a voice on issues and concerns that affect their lives.

Made up of 125 student-athletes from across the state, including 31 Student Ambassadors that guide it, the SAAC and has been meeting since August 2018. While it has already discussed a variety of topics, one issue that has been brought up repeatedly is time. More specifically — there's not enough of it.

Between demanding course loads at school, the ever-increasing commitments of our sports schedules, and other extra-curricular activities, it's harder than ever for us to do simple things such as spend time with our families, get enough sleep or just spend time hanging out with our friends.

So, how do we solve this problem? We conducted surveys in order to get feedback from other student-athletes. More than 1,500 student-athletes from across the state responded to our questions. All survey responses were anonymous, and they are not attributable to any individual high school.

Following are our findings.

Q: Should it be mandatory for student-athletes to have one day off per week, once regular-season contests begin?

A: 75.4% yes, 24.6% no.

A general feeling was that a day off is necessary to catch up on schoolwork, family and sleep. And if the NCAA requires a mandatory day off every seven days for college athletes, shouldn't the same thing be required for high school athletes? Everyone needs a chance to recharge, it would give us a chance to catch up on schoolwork, family and sleep.

Q: Should there be limits placed on the number of hours student-athletes participate on a daily and weekly basis during the regular season?

A: 48.4% yes, 51.6% no

Some of the responding athletes felt that the quantity of hours spent practicing does not always correlate to success, but that limiting the number of hours could take away from valuable team bonding opportunities. Also, there were concerns that not all coaches would respect the limits and would seek to circumvent them anyway.

We realize that these limits would be difficult to implement and enforce; therefore, we ask all coaches and athletic administrators to stay mindful of the hours being spent on a daily and weekly basis to athletics to ensure we have enough time for schoolwork, sleep and family.

Q: Should there be limits placed on the number of hours student-athletes participate in strength and conditioning during the off season?

A: 44.6% yes, 55.4% no.

Students expressed a feeling that optional workouts are good if we are not in season for another sport, but also expressed concern that some feel “optional” is still mandatory and there can often be guilt and consequences associated with non-attendance. An overwhelming message to all coaches is to please respect our time when we are in season for another sport, and to please encourage us to take a break from off-season workouts while we are participating in another sport.

There also were concerns expressed that football coaches in particular overwork their players in the off-season and do not always support participation in another sport. Many student-athletes also commented that access to weight rooms is not always equitable and should be better scheduled, and regulated, to ensure that all teams have equal access at reasonable times, specifically for those sports that are in-season.

Q: Should there be blackout weeks that prohibit involvement with high school athletics during the summer recess?

A: 64.4% yes, 35.6% no.

Many of us have not been able to go on a family vacation in years, or we spend our family vacation travelling to and from vacation for our summer workouts. We feel that having this time built into our personal calendars will allow us to get some much needed rest without the guilt of missing our summer workouts. After this time off, we would return to our teams physically rested, mentally clear and emotionally ready to get back to work.

While some conferences have made their own rules on this matter, one school, Waldwick High School in Bergen County, will implement a two-week blackout period this summer that runs from July 22 through Aug. 4. This decision was made by school officials monitoring the discussions that have emanated from our SAAC meetings. We applaud Waldwick High School for taking this initiative and we hope many schools seriously consider doing the same.

We feel that every school should look to adopt a school-wide summer recess blackout period. Not only for the sake of athletes and their families, but for coaches, athletic trainers and athletic administrators as well. Summer should provide much-needed downtime for everyone involved in high school athletics. We have learned during the past year that the athletic seasons overlap for many reasons, which makes it very difficult to get some downtime during the school year.

In summary, our overall message is that while some student-athletes may continue playing a sport in college, not all of us want to play competitively at the next level. We’ve all heard the NCAA statistics that a very small percentage of us will go on to play in college, and an even smaller percentage will continue playing a sport beyond college. So, we realize that our academics always need to take a priority. We know the real world isn’t far away, but sometimes we need help from our coaches and parents to remind us to keep our academic requirements a priority.

Today’s student-athletes feel immense pressure and competition to be well-rounded in order to get into a good college. We recognize that being well-rounded goes beyond athletics, and coaches need to respect and encourage non-athletic activities as well. We also ask our coaches and parents to help us find adequate downtime on a regular basis that will provide the opportunity to recover physically, mentally and emotionally.

Lastly, we ask our coaches and parents to encourage us to participate in multiple sports. There are many physical and social benefits that will last a lifetime and we have limited years to participate in multiple sports.

Under the direction of Colleen Maguire, NJSIAA director of finance, and with the help of our Advisors, Stan Fryczynski, former Secaucus High School athletic director, and Frank Noppenberger, former East Brunswick High School athletic director, we will continue to gather feedback from student-athletes across New Jersey and we look forward to continuing these conversations, as well as seeking common-sense ways to address other important issues facing New Jersey high school student-athletes. Please stay tuned.

NJSIAA Student Ambassadors:

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Logan Germano, Barnegat	Eve Miller, Kent Place	Colby Sellitto, Passaic Valley
Trent Burton, Brick Memorial	Shomiron Dhar, Lenape	Francesco Ferrara, Ramapo
Nick Sacco, Bridgewater-Raritan	Emma Garofalo, Matawan	Meghan Lichtenberger, Rutherford
Owen Rigney, Christian Brothers	Yvanna Germosen, Memorial	Nicholas Wagner, Shawnee
Aidan Feulner, Cresskill	Sean Furlong, Midland Park	Jillian Ryan, South Brunswick
Jordan Sarnoff, Fort Lee	Jamie Serruto, Millburn	Christopher Buerle, Union Catholic
Emily Smart, Haddonfield	Sade Harvey, North Star Academy	Antonia Gismondi, West Deptford
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