

# Proposal to split public, private school athletic events

ST. LOUIS – Some Catholic and public high school officials in the St. Louis area said they are against a proposal to create separate state athletic championships for private and public schools.

Private and public school educators and coaches contacted by the St. Louis Review, newspaper of the St. Louis Archdiocese, noted that their students enjoy the competition against each other.

The proposal before the Missouri State High School Activities Association stems from a petition begun by Belle High School in Belle. It would apply to about a dozen sports played at the 506 public schools and 72 nonpublic schools in the association.

In recent years, several Catholic schools in the St. Louis Archdiocese have won state titles in soccer, tennis, golf, baseball, volleyball, track and basketball. Other private schools, such as Rockhurst in the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, also have been known for successful sports programs.

Father Mitch Doyen, associate superintendent for secondary education with the Catholic Education Office in St. Louis, said “the tone in St. Louis has been very collaborative” between public schools and private and parochial schools.

There is no animosity between the groups in St. Louis, though some tension may exist over competition and resource issues, he said.

It is generally believed that school districts in other parts of Missouri support the split.

Athletic directors from 25 nonpublic schools in the St. Louis area recently addressed the proposal, which will be voted on through mail ballots to be distributed in April and due May 1. A statement drafted by the group – both Catholic and non-Catholic private schools – asked public schools in St. Louis to oppose the proposal for separate state competitions.

The statement reaffirmed the schools' commitment to the values of participation, sportsmanship, team play and personal excellence spelled out in the handbook of the Missouri State High School Activities Association.

It also stated that "we are dismayed when we see the cultural trend to link winning or losing to the perceived competence of a child, coach, the quality of education in a school or even the caliber and desirability of a community."

A state title does not equate with success, the letter stated. "The truth is that while winning is a wholesome and desirable goal, it seems to be overemphasized in today's culture."

It cited the collaboration between public and nonpublic schools.

Father Doyen said he hopes that further dialogue on the proposal will show it does not have widespread support. He said the letter by the 25 schools has been well received by public school administrators and athletic directors in the St. Louis area.

There has been an ongoing discussion about why particular schools may win a number of championships, he said. The factors are complex, he noted.

"You assume it's because the schools are nonpublic, but you have some very successful public school districts," he said.

Other divisions could be made among schools in richer versus poorer communities, for example, he said. And certain sociological factors may have to be considered when examining certain sports such as golf or tennis, Father Doyen added.

There is a difference among nonpublic schools, he said, noting that of the 72 nonpublic schools, at least 10 have never come close to a state title.

David Shelton, director for administrative services for the Catholic Education Office and a former public school administrator, said creating separate systems would cause other problems. The goal, he said, is to focus on the educational aspect of having students experience competition and camaraderie with students from other schools.