

IGHSAU, IHSAA merger in future?

Written by Jim Ecker

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Iowa is the only state in the country that has separate high school sports organizations for boys and girls.

Mark Schneider, the superintendent of the Mid-Prairie school district in Wellman, thinks it may be time to merge the two bodies together.

The Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union (IGHSAU) and Iowa High School Athletic Association (IHSAA) have their own buildings, their own staffs, their own executive director and sometimes their own ways of doing business.

Schneider thinks there could be ways to coordinate the efforts to save money, work more efficiently and be more consistent in how things are done.

"Yes, that is true," he said. "I've been a little vocal about it recently.

"I believe it makes sense to merge the two associations, but I also believe I'm just one person. Maybe I don't know all the pros and cons in doing that."

Schneider has met with Rick Wulkow, the executive director of the IHSAA, and with Mike Dick, the executive director of the IGHSAU, to discuss the proposal and get their perspective.

The next step could be a survey of all the school superintendents in Iowa to gauge their feelings, and that could lead to an independent study by an outside organization.

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Schneider indicated the survey could be conducted this fall.

"I would certainly think there is interest at least to do a study," he said. "It's my personal opinion that a lot of good could come out of a merger.

"I think it makes sense to study the issue. An independent study. A non-biased study."

Dick said he's not opposed to a survey, but clearly does not think a merger is a good idea.

"It's something that we always talk about and take a look at from time to time," said Dick. "It's been 10 years since it's really reared its head.

"It's obviously not something that we are in favor of doing right now," he said. "But we're willing to at least talk and take a look."

Dick said he plans to discuss the topic with the IGHSAU Representative Council of school officials this week. Schneider is a member of the IHSAA Representative Council and has already broached the idea with his group.

"We don't want to over-react, but we also don't want to under-react," said Dick. "We want to be open and visit with the right groups and the right people and see what direction we need to head on this."

Dick noted there are actually four governing bodies in Iowa when you count the separate organizations for music and speech.

Dick thinks the IGHSAU has played an important role in the development of girls athletics in Iowa.

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"Our kids get special treatment," he said. "We're able to specifically address the needs and desires of girls athletics."

Dick said the same holds true for the IHSAA, the Iowa High School Music Association and the Iowa High School Speech Association.

"In other states, you have one organization looking out for all of them, and I think in a lot of states the girls athletics gets slighted, and I think the music and the speech really get slighted," he said.

"We're able to take care of our own groups and provide some opportunities and some things that I'm not sure they'd get when they're all together."

Schneider disagrees with Dick's point of view. Schneider does not think girls athletics would be slighted if there was one governing body for girls and boys.

"I take offense to that. I really do," he said. "I can't believe the boys and girls would be treated any differently if they were part of the same union. That really frosts me. I don't buy it.

"I don't see myself as being sexist. I don't buy that argument."

Wulkow declined comment on the idea of merging the IHSAA and IGHSAU.

"I would have no comment at this time, or at least until such time strategies would be developed," he stated in an e-mail. "If it was my initiative, I'd be willing to discuss it. However, that is not the case here."

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Schneider said other school superintendents are in favor of studying the issue. "There were some people opposed to it. And I understand," he said. "For some people, change is always hard.

"I still think you can make changes and improve things and still honor tradition. You look for ways that aren't painful."

Schneider noted that Wulkow and Dick could be nearing retirement in coming years, so he thinks it makes sense to study the issue now in case there is a merger and there's room for only one executive director.

"To me, this is the perfect time to be looking at this," he said.

Schneider said he's not looking to eliminate jobs, but thinks a merger could save time and money.

"From my perspective, I think there would be financial efficiencies," he said. "Just simple things, like basketball officials.

"Boys officials and girls officials have to go to two different training sessions and take two different tests, and it's my understanding there are only three things that are different between the boys and the girls.

"Here schools are having so much difficulty trying to get officials, and it's almost like we're putting up a roadblock to officials and making it more difficult for them to be officials in the state of Iowa."

The IGHSAU offices are located in West Des Moines. The IHSAA is located in Boone. That issue would have to be resolved if they merge.

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Dick does not think a merger would necessarily lead to more consistency, efficiency and savings.

"It's a perspective that a lot of people on the outside of the organizations always have," he said. "Anytime you put two together, they think they're going to eliminate one. And that's not true.

"You're still going to need most of the same staff. Could there be a slight reduction somewhere? Yeah, you might need one person instead of two to answer the telephone or something like that."

Schneider believes it's time for a serious discussion of the issue.

"We're the only state in the United States that has separate organizations," he said. "And to me looking at it from the outside, it just doesn't seem to make sense."