

Open enrollment has been relatively harmless

Written by Mark Dukes

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Between my junior and senior year in high school, my family moved from the west side of Cedar Rapids to the east side. Naturally, I wanted to finish at Jefferson with my friends rather than go one year to Kennedy.

Since I wasn't a high profile athlete (bench warmer in basketball, sometime scorer on the golf team), there was little problem staying at Jefferson for my senior year. A guidance counselor and former neighbor of our family handled the request with no paperwork or superintendent approval.

Had I been a Mr. Basketball candidate or a four-star football recruit, Kennedy might have balked, claiming I lived only a few blocks from 42nd Street and Wenig Road. But that wasn't the case.

At some point, transferring between school districts for athletic reasons became a problem. Open enrollment was first authorized in Iowa for the 1989-90 school year, and with it came restrictions for those involved in athletics. Students transferring between districts have had to sit out 90 days before participating in a sport.

Now, the Iowa Legislature is trying to stiffen the rules. Sen. Randy Feenstra, R-Hull, introduced Senate File 74 last week. He wants the waiting period for athletes to be 180 days instead of 90. Feenstra said he introduced the bill because he had heard complaints in his district (Sioux County) that an increasing number of students were transferring for athletic purposes.

I think Feenstra is going in the wrong direction. The waiting period should be stricken, period.

Has open enrollment done that much harm to Metro high school athletics? Sure, there have been schools and coaches that covertly covet prized athletes. Students have transferred from the Cedar Rapids Community School district to College Community, Linn-Mar and Xavier -- and

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vice versa. It has led to some bad feelings among coaches in competing districts. But at the end of the day, has it really hurt anything?

If local athletes somehow got together and formed a Miami Heat dream team, that would raise some eyebrows. If Marcus Paige, Jarrod Uthoff, Josh Oglesby, Matt Bohannon and Kasey Semler (perhaps this year's all-Metro basketball team) met a couple years ago and decided to all go to one high school, well, there might have been a bit of an uproar. But that's an exaggeration.

Under the open enrollment rules, athletes are being treated differently than non-athletes. I know, the waiting period is in place to discourage wholesale transfers and building potential state championship teams. But why should athletes have to operate by different rules?

If the first chair violinist wants to transfer to the Metro school with the best orchestra, it's no problem. If the talented tenor wants to be involved in the best show choir going, so be it. If you're a star shortstop, though, you must be penalized.

The number of students choosing to open enroll has grown from 2,700 in 1990 to almost 25,000 statewide. A good portion of those transfers probably are because of athletics.

In some cases, individuals have improved themselves to the point of attracting college scholarship offers. In most situations, though, athletes open enrolling have had almost no negative impact on the high school landscape.

So legislators, if you really want to improve the open enrollment rules, strike the 90-day waiting period for athletes. Otherwise, go on about your business of facing the real issues in Iowa.