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News From The House Democrats

REP. BRIGGS, SEN. WHITE TEAM UP IN BIPARTISAN EFFORT TO PROMOTE GENDER EQUITY IN SCHOOL SPORTS

HARRISBURG, Feb. 3 – Today is National Girls and Women in Sports Day and state Rep. Tim Briggs, D-Montgomery, Senator Mary Jo White, R-Venango, and Anne Bale, deputy director of the PA Commission for Women, held a media event at the state Capitol today in recognition of the day and to discuss legislation the two lawmakers are working on to level the playing field for male and female middle school and high school athletes in Pennsylvania.

Briggs said National Girls and Women in Sports Day has been celebrated on the first Wednesday in February every year since 1987 in all 50 states with community events honoring the achievements and encouraging participation of girls and women in sports.

"The theme for this year's recognition event is 'Stay Strong, Play On' and I think that it couldn't be more apropos," Briggs said. "So many amazing women have made such great strides in the world of sports so that our young girls today can reach for the stars. The fight for full gender equity in school sports is far from over and as legislators we owe it to those trailblazing women to 'stay strong and fight on' by passing the Pennsylvania Equity in Interscholastic Athletics Disclosure Act now."

In a bipartisan effort, Briggs is working with White on legislation (HB-2061/SB-890) that would require school districts to disclose to the state information pertaining to Title IX laws to ensure that schools offer female student athletes equal opportunities compared to their male counterparts. White joined Briggs in recognizing National Girls and Women in Sports Day at the Capitol and discussed their legislative efforts.

"Young women who participate in high school athletics are more likely to stay in school, to have higher grades, and to graduate," White said. "The proposed legislation would make it easy for a student athlete, parent or taxpayer to assess how well a school is meeting its legal obligation to provide equal opportunities for female students."

Bale also lauded the benefits that athletic competition has for young women, saying that studies link participation in athletics to lower rates of depression, drug and alcohol use, obesity and teen pregnancy while enhancing leadership skills and building better self confidence.

"There's a lot more to Title IX than just facilities and athletic opportunities," Bale said. "It's about building up young people, both boys and girls and preparing them for a future of meaningful and productive work. That's why the Pennsylvania Commission for Women supports SB-890 and HB-2061."

Similar federal legislation aimed at ensuring that schools are upholding their Title IX commitment has been in place at the collegiate level since 1994 when Congress passed the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act, said Women's Law Project Managing Attorney Terry Fromson. Colleges and universities must annually disclose Title IX related data to the U.S. Department of Education.

"This information is posted on the U.S. Department of Education's Web site and is easily accessible to anyone who wants to know how a particular school is treating its young women," Fromson

said. "Since this data became available, there have been significant gains in the number of college women participating in athletics."

Peg Pennepacker, assistant principal and athletic director at Susquehanna Township High School in Harrisburg, urged the state legislature to pass the Pennsylvania Equity in Interscholastic Athletics Disclosure Act. A nationally renowned expert who has been educating high school athletic directors across the country about Title IX compliance for a decade, Pennepacker stressed the importance of implementing this legislation at the middle and high school levels.

"I can assure you that inequity continues to exist to a great degree at the high school level," Pennepacker said. "Athletic directors in the professional development classes I teach in Pennsylvania tell me about continuing inequities in their schools' athletic programs. While much of the conversation about Title IX has been centered on the collegiate level, it is in large part what happens at the K-12 level that prepares or does not prepare young girls to want to be involved when they get to the college level. Interest in sports evolves as a function of opportunity and experience."

Two high school athletes from Northern York High School, Margaret Ruth and Evie Rentzel, talked about the positive impact playing sports has had on their lives. Rentzel discussed the mental growth and character development that she has seen as a result from her experience on the playing field. Ruth said playing sports keeps her very busy and has had unexpected but positive effect: making her more organized and productive.

"For the little time that I have left during my day, I have had to organize my time to be as productive as possible in my school work," said Ruth, who plans to play field hockey at Susquehanna University next year. "Because of this I have become a very responsible person, preparing me for the work force."

Briggs was encouraged by the event and anticipates a positive future for his bill. House Education Committee Chairman Rep. Jim Roebuck, who is the top co-sponsor of HB-2061, echoed Briggs' confidence.

"We have been very encouraged by the positive response of our colleagues in the House," Roebuck said. "I look forward to continuing to work with Representative Briggs to promote gender equity in the Commonwealth."

Briggs and Roebuck are discussing plans for holding a hearing on HB-2061 in the coming months.
