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In 2011, concussion awareness not a formality

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Long gone are the days of completing a physical form, signing a permission slip and hitting the playing field.

Now, before any student-athlete straps on his helmet and pads, laces her soccer cleats or stretches for cheerleading — or even prepares to high-step it with the band — he or she must have completed a concussion awareness program mandated by the state and MIAA.

And it's not just another required form to fill out, as sports-related head injuries have been taken more seriously in recent years. Recent studies show concussions often go undiagnosed and can have lasting effects on students' performance on the field, in the classroom and in general life.

Although a state law was enacted last fall, it left schools little time to follow through with the requirement that all student-athletes and band participants and their parents view a concussion education video online and complete and sign paperwork detailing an athlete's concussion history.

In addition, all coaches, athletic directors, trainers and officials must complete online training regarding concussions.

With the new school year here, area athletic directors have been busy preparing and making sure that they, their coaches and student-athletes are in compliance.

So far, meeting the requirements has, for the most part, been an easy process.

"So much has changed since we were in school," Oxford High athletic director John Doldoorian said. "It used be you got dinged or got your bell rang, you shook it off and got back in the game. Now we know of the seriousness of what can happen. It's making people, especially parents, more aware of the signs and what to do."

According to the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts, a Westboro-based organization created in 1982 by three women whose sons suffered severe brain injuries, the signs of a concussion — which, in actuality, is a mild brain injury — vary greatly and can have short-term to long-lasting effects. And a concussion doesn't have to be the result of a severe blow to the head — even a quick bump or jolt can cause injury.

Last year, a Kansas high school football player was hit hard, suffered a concussion and died less than a month after returning to the field.

In Massachusetts, the state's Executive Office of Health and Human Services has been creating and providing resources for schools to comply with the law.

"They've been great in clarifying and taking the anxiety out of what we need to do and the expectations," Algonquin Regional athletic director Fran Whitten said. "We're confident that we're doing everything possible to protect the kids."

For most, if not all, schools such as Algonquin and Oxford, that means including the form on concussions in all of the student-athletes' preseason info.

Still, at other schools, there have been baseline testing and mandatory meetings and educational programs for students and parents.

Testing — in which each athlete is administered a memorization test at the beginning of the year, periodically during and at the end of the season and if he or she has sustained a concussion — can cost upward of \$1,000 per school.

Though testing is a useful tool in assessing whether a student suffered a concussion when there might not have been initial symptoms or a diagnosis, many schools have difficulty affording it.

“It’s something we’ve talked about in our athletic director meeting, maybe (purchasing) collectively as a league,” Doldorian said. “It’s something we’re talking about.”

Now that folks are talking about it, they’re beginning to learn the serious consequences and effects a concussion — even a mild one — can have.

“It’s important to understand the magnitude of getting a concussion,” Whitten said. “What used to be just getting a stinger or dinged is something much more serious.”

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