Mandating Athletic Trainers in High Schools
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Introduction

The National Athletic Trainers’ Association estimates that 42 percent of high schools across the nation have access to athletic training services either through direct employment or clinic outreach. As of November 2008, 4,602 NATA members report working directly for a secondary school with 4,474 of these members working at high schools. Additionally, 2,343 members report working at a secondary school via clinic outreach. In total, 6,945 NATA members provide service to secondary schools in some fashion, meaning 22 percent of NATA’s membership currently works in the secondary school setting.

Obviously, many would like to see the 42 percent figure increase, particularly in FTE positions. Student-athlete deaths in the past year from heat related illnesses and concussions have highlighted the need for improved medical care for high school athletes. These tragedies also lead to the question: Why don’t all high schools have access to an athletic trainer?

One solution to the lack of athletic trainers in high schools is the legislative mandate. Many positives would come from a state or national mandate, including more positions for athletic trainers and the improved health and safety of student athletes. However, many questions arise with a mandate as well. How would a mandate be funded? Are there enough athletic trainers to fill these positions? How many of these positions would be high quality jobs for our membership?

Existing Mandates

Despite popular belief, no state has legislation that requires every high school to have an athletic trainer. However, a couple areas of the country have succeeded in “universal” coverage for their schools.

Hawaii

There is a common misconception that Hawaii has mandated athletic trainers in every high school in the state. In fact, Hawaii has succeeded in placing an athletic trainer in every high school because it has a unique school system and most importantly, funding. Hawaii has a statewide school system, meaning it has only one district. The state has a policy that allocates funds for an athletic trainer in every high school. The schools do not have to hire an athletic
trainer, but funds exist to do so that cannot be used by the school for anything else but an athletic training position.

Washington, D.C.
Likewise, Washington DC has succeeded in placing an athletic trainer in all of their high schools or close to it. Here, there is a policy in place that requires a physician to be present at every high school football game and funding has allowed for nearly 100 percent penetration of athletic trainers in the high schools.

Current State Legislation

Recently a few states have looked into mandates following the deaths of high school athletes.

Arkansas
Arkansas created a task force to look into how to increase the number of athletic trainers providing service to state high schools and ensure that schools are given consistent medical information to improve student athlete safety. The Arkansas Task Force is still looking into a possible mandate. They have recommended that the Task Force work to consider the possibility of a state mandate by 2015. NATA estimates that only nine percent of Arkansas high schools have access to an athletic trainer.

North Carolina
Similarly, an athletic safety task force was formed in North Carolina this year following the deaths of three high school athletes. The first recommendation of the task force is to introduce legislation in January 2009 that would mandate all NCHSAA high schools employ a full time athletic trainer by August 1, 2011. Their proposed mandate would require the State of North Carolina provide funding to each school to hire an athletic trainer. The North Carolina task force also recommends that schools currently without an athletic trainer should use and athletic trainers as a consultant to develop emergency action plans by August 2009. NATA estimates that 58 percent of North Carolina high schools have some access to an athletic trainer.

Oklahoma
In November, 2008, the Oklahoma State Board of Health supported a resolution to make athletic trainers available to all high schools in the state. The resolution cited at least eight deaths in Oklahoma high school sports since 1999 and more than 18,000 high school students suffering from a time-loss injury each year. NATA estimates that only 8 percent of Oklahoma high schools have access to an athletic trainer.

Other State Legislation
A number of states have looked into legislation that either mandates or sets aside funds for AEDs in high schools. This type of legislation is important considering that the placement of AEDs in schools opens discussion to having a qualified medical person, i.e. a certified athletic trainer, present to oversee the use of the AED.

*For more information on all state legislation mentioned, see attached materials.
Athletic Trainer Shortages

Comparison of the numbers
A major concern with any mandate is if there are enough athletic trainers to fill the mandated positions. A quick look at the numbers suggest that a major marketing push would first be necessary to recruit high school students or undeclared science majors to the athletic training profession and the secondary school setting before any wide sweeping mandates would be possible. Although mandates are generally discussed at the state level, analyzing the national statistics provides a good example of the difficulty in filling any mandate.

The most current numbers from the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics are from the 2005-06 school year. During that year there were 19,013 high schools in the United States. This figure excludes junior highs and middle schools, combined elementary and secondary schools and special education and alternative high schools. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Public elementary and secondary schools, by type of school: Selected years, 1967-68 through 2005-06)

The most current membership numbers from NATA show 31,292 total members as of November 2008. Obviously for a nationwide mandate at all public high schools to work, roughly 19,013 athletic trainers would be needed for placement at each school. This assumes that the mandate call for a full-time athletic trainer for each school. Two sectors of NATA membership we assume are not part of the workforce at present. 549 NATA members report being retired and 4,839 report being students. This leaves 25,904 members who are an active part of the workforce. A mandate in every state would mean that 73 percent of working NATA members would have to work at a secondary school and members currently working in clinics, colleges, hospitals, professional sports and others would have to voluntarily switch job settings for an immediate mandate to be filled. This would leave 6,891 working members in settings other than secondary school and leave professional and college sports without athletic trainers. Obviously, this is not realistic.

Again, this example illustrates what would occur if every state decided to mandate athletic trainers. Although this is not a likely scenario, it shows how difficult it would be for a state to do this as well. A major workforce shortage would likely occur in most states that mandated an athletic trainer. For example, Oklahoma has 583 regular secondary schools according to the U.S. Department of Education. There are only 331 certified athletic trainers in the entire state. Arkansas has around 400 regular high schools and 220 certified athletic trainers.

Most proposed mandates have a longer-term deadline and are not immediate. Arkansas proposed the year 2015 and North Carolina proposed 2011 for the date to have all high school positions filled. Even in these cases, a major influx of new students would have to be recruited for secondary school positions. If every current athletic training student member in the country chose to work in a high school after graduating from college, the number of athletic trainers working in high schools would more than double. However, this influx of athletic trainers to the high school settings would still leave 9,700 schools without a full-time athletic trainer.
It should be noted that these comparisons are not perfect. All athletic trainers are not necessarily members of NATA and the comparisons do not account for members working in private high schools. Also, these comparisons assume a mandate of a full-time athletic trainer at every high school. Some mandates may allow for one athletic trainer to cover multiple high schools. However, these figures do illustrate the challenge of filling any mandate in the short term.

For a better understanding of the current athletic training workforce, a breakdown of NATA membership as of November, 2008 is included below.

**NATA Total Membership by Job Setting – November, 2008**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Setting</th>
<th>Setting Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Job Setting</td>
<td>3030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amateur/Recreational/Youth Sports</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinic</td>
<td>7163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College/University</td>
<td>6060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business/Sales/Marketing</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/Fitness/Sports Performance</td>
<td>374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital</td>
<td>642</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Contractor</td>
<td>430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial/Occupational</td>
<td>334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military/Law Enforcement/Government</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Sports</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>4839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>643</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>31292</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Job Quality and Existing Shortages**

Another issue beyond filling open positions a mandate would bring is the quality of the positions that would be created by a mandate. Athletic trainer shortages have already been noted in Pennsylvania, Texas, Arizona, Florida, Indiana and South Dakota for reasons of poor job quality, including heavy teaching requirements, poor pay, long hours and location.

This makes the funding of any mandate extremely important. An unfunded mandate runs the risk of creating sub standard jobs for NATA members. Even with a fully funded mandate that creates positions with no teaching requirement and good pay, some positions may be difficult to fill because of remote locations. Schools in these remote, rural areas have already had problems finding applicants for open positions.

Although one of NATA’s goals is to increase the number of athletic trainers in the secondary school setting, it is also committed to improving the jobs of its members as well. Many jobs created by a mandate may not meet the professional standard deserved of an employee with the
education and skill set of a certified athletic trainer. The NATA has to keep the quality of athletic training employment in mind while working to increase overall employment opportunities.

**Mandates and Other Healthcare Professionals**

Inadvertently creating jobs for other healthcare professionals in the athletic training field may be a negative result of an aggressive mandate. If demand for athletic trainers is generated without the supply of athletic trainers to fill it, schools will turn to other healthcare options.

Physical therapists of late have examined expanding their normal work setting to the athletic field. The question has been asked repeatedly on the PT listserv as to how staff physical therapists from a clinic could cover games and rehabilitation for area high schools without hiring an athletic trainer. Also, a high school in Louisiana last year hired a physical therapist from a clinic instead of an athletic trainer to provide health care services to their athletes.

There has also been debate on the need for athletic trainers when EMTs are already on-site for games. NATA must make sure that schools view athletic trainers as the most qualified to fill positions in high schools and ensure that schools are aware of state practice acts that define the role of the athletic trainer, physical therapist and EMT.

Physical therapists and EMTs are not the only possible avenues a school or district may look into to cut costs. Physical therapy assistants could also be used by high schools looking to adhere to a mandate in the most cost effective way possible. An NATA member reported losing her job when her school district decided to hire a clinic providing physical therapy assistants for sports medicine coverage.

In some schools in North Carolina, schools hired “injury management specialists,” who have some training in CPR, first aid and injury management but not necessarily any educational background in sports medicine. Schools may begin to look into hiring people such as this, who don’t have an educational background comparable to an athletic trainer but have obtained online certifications or participated in one-day workshops. Fitness professionals, such as personal trainers, can obtain online certifications and attend workshops in sports medicine areas. These individuals could give schools a less expensive avenue for sports medicine services. PostRehab online has courses to obtain certifications for Post Rehab Conditioning Specialists, Medical Exercise Specialists and Medical Exercise Program Directors. All can be ordered online.

The obvious concern here is creating options for schools to hire less qualified individuals who may not have the necessary education or skill set to properly care for high school athletes. Schools that currently employ an athletic trainer could explore one of the above options if they proved more cost effective.
**Conclusions**

Mandating athletic trainers in the high school setting is an important issue and one that needs to be monitored. The secondary school setting is a strategic focus and a setting with the potential for growth. State mandates of athletic trainers in all high schools obviously would improve the hiring of members in the setting but it also creates concern if the profession cannot meet the demand created by the mandate. Supplying qualified candidates who are interested in working in secondary schools is essential. The following are key considerations in addressing the issue of athletic trainer mandates in high schools.

- NATA should focus on more effective marketing initiatives to improve hiring in the secondary school market than governmental mandates.

- Funding should be the first legislative focus before mandates. If a mandate is proposed, funding the mandate is essential and a longer timeline is preferred. An unfunded mandate with an aggressive timeline would create a demand for athletic trainers that could not be filled. Position quality would also suffer and open the door to other health care providers who are not as qualified as an athletic trainer to fill these jobs. Even worse, a completely unqualified person with no medical background may be selected to fill these vacancies.

- Having an athletic trainer in every high school is the ultimate goal, but it will have to be a slow process. A longer term timeline will help with obtaining funding for all of the positions and help ensure job quality. A mandate could also provide funding for scholarships and education programs to increase the number of students interested in filling these jobs. A mandate like this may be far-fetched but it illustrates the need for time for this goal to be reached. Demanding a mandate without having the work force to fill it would be counter-productive to the profession.

- Having a tiered mandate may be beneficial. Instead of a flat mandate, states may look into creating legislation that improves the hiring of athletic trainers along the way on a year to year or five year basis for example. This would put less of a strain on the supply of athletic trainers and more control would exist on the quality of jobs being created, while steadily improving the number of athletic trainers in high schools and health and safety of students.

- The supply issue must be addressed. An athletic trainer mandate would be great for improving the hiring of athletic trainers in the secondary school setting and improving the health and safety of students nationwide. However, to accommodate this NATA and athletic training educators must internally market the profession and the high school setting to students who are making choices on their future careers.

- Another key issue is job quality. Improving pay, working conditions and decreasing teaching loads is key to making the setting more attractive to members and increasing the supply of athletic trainers in the secondary school setting.