Rehabilitating Sports Safety: Mandating Certified Athletic Trainers in California High Schools

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THESIS
California is the only state that does not mandate or regulate athletic training. The State of California should require athletic trainer certification and develop stricter safety codes in high-school sports, eventually requiring trainers at every high school athletics competition.

BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS
When Miller Boafo, a Redlands High School football player, suffered a hit during a game, his team’s athletic trainer (or AT) diagnosed his response as “flu-like symptoms.” After the ambulance was called because Boafo became unconscious, he was taken to the hospital, subsequently undergoing a five-hour brain surgery for bleeding in the brain that almost went undiagnosed.¹ The Redlands High School athletic trainer is still employed and still not certified. And, as of now, that’s perfectly legal.²

Athletic trainers are highly skilled medical professionals who specialize in the prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation of medical conditions. Currently, California is the only state that does not require ATs to have the National Athletic Trainers’ Association’s “Athletic Training Credential” (ATC).³

Only 25 percent of California high schools employ a full-time athletic trainer,⁴ and California ranks 50th out of 51 states, including D.C., for high school sports safety.⁵ A 2012 study by the American Pediatrics Association found that schools with certified athletic trainers have a significantly lower rate of injury for high school athletes than schools who do not.⁶ A lack of urgency and inadequate monetary allocations have caused a shortage of certified ATs. As a result, high school athletes, especially students of color, are at a significantly higher risk of injury. Black students are more likely to participate in both high school football and basketball, the country’s most injury-prone sports; racial minorities are consequently disproportionately affected by sports injuries, and a lack of licensed ATs.⁷

TALKING POINTS
• In California, anyone can call himself or herself an athletic trainer, regardless of whether he or she possesses the educational qualifications, clinical experience, or sufficient medical knowledge to practice.

• Because licensure is not required through a central board, there is no formal procedure to file a complaint against an athletic trainer for malpractice and have it investigated.⁸

• Requiring certification for all athletic trainers would improve athlete safety by ensuring the presence of a qualified and educated medical professional who can quickly respond to crises with informed judgment.

• Students of color are more affected by the lack of athletic trainers, as they are more likely to play injury-prone sports such as basketball and football.⁹
Given that California has nearly 1 million high school student athletes, it is critical to ensure their safety. Schools that lack qualified athletic trainers or trainers altogether put their athletes at significantly higher risk of serious injury. A comprehensive study conducted by the Korey Stringer Institute found that North Carolina has the leading athletic safety policies. In addition to requiring licensed and regulated athletic trainers, North Carolina requires that every school that sponsors athletics should develop an Athletics Emergency Action Plan (AEAP) specifically for managing serious and/or potentially life-threatening sport-related injuries. In comparison, California has neither.

Overall injury rates are lower and concussions are correctly diagnosed more in schools with athletic trainers. A comparative study conducted by the American Association of Pediatrics showed that among soccer players, overall injury rates were approximately 1.73 times higher, and recurring injury rates were 5.7 times higher in schools without ATs than schools with them. Furthermore, concussions were reported 8.05 times more in schools with athletic trainers, indicating that significantly fewer number of concussions go undiagnosed and untreated when high schools hire an AT.

In addition to safeguarding the health and wellbeing of student-athletes, an athletic trainer’s ability to respond to issues swiftly leads to decreased costs for schools and parents. A case study of a Michigan school that employed a full-time athletic trainer reported saving over $8,000, not including savings for athletes’ families for decreased visits to doctors and physical therapists.

Our key allies include the California Athletic Trainers Association, National Athletic Trainers Association, and high school sports coaches, parents, and athletes statewide. To bolster our cause before the California Assembly, we will gather personal stories through interviews at local high school sporting events regarding California high school ATs.

In the immediate future, we plan to collaborate with the California Interscholastic Federation, which has made it one of its top priorities to educate principals, superintendents, and athletic directors on the importance of hiring an athletic trainer. We hope to collaborate with the CIF to brainstorm funding options to subsidize or decrease the current cost of hiring an AT, which amounts to $50,000 to $100,000 per year.

To gather community support for our proposed policy, we will promote a social media campaign focused on sports education and safety, partnering with local news stations to widen the platform of our policy’s reach.

**KEY FACTS**

- California ranks 50th out of 51 states (including D.C.) for high school sports safety based on adherence to best practices developed by a national task-force.
- Only 25 percent of California high schools employ a full-time athletic trainer.
- 16.2 percent of high school athletic trainers in California are not certified.
- High school football players experience more than half of all high school sports injuries, and black males are more likely than whites to participate in this injury-heavy sport, disproportionately targeting them for potentially life-threatening situations without a licensed trainer.
- Schools that employ athletic trainers have shown cost savings of up to approximately $8,300 per year, excluding costs saved by student athletes and their families.
ENDNOTES


4 Fader, “California.”


8 California Athletic Trainers’ Association, “Current.”

9 Turner, “Reported.”

10 UConn. Korey Stringer Institute “North Carolina.”

11 Fader, “California.”

12 Fader, “California.”


14 UConn. Korey Stringer Institute “North Carolina.”

15 LaBella et al., “A Comparative Analysis.”
