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HIGH SCHOOL

What would an AHSAA public-private split mean for AISA high school athletics?



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Key Points

- The Alabama High School Athletic Association (AHSAA) delayed its fall sports reclassification due to mediation.
 - The AHSAA is reportedly considering a model that would split public and private schools for postseason play.
 - The Alabama Independent School Association (AISA) believes allowing cross-play between the two associations would ease public-private tensions.
 - A dispute over the AHSAA's interpretation of the CHOOSE Act has led to legal action from Gov. Kay Ivey.
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The [Alabama High School Athletic Association](#) moved its fall sports reclassification from Dec. 15 to Jan. 23, citing mediation as the reason for the rescheduling.

The AHSAA didn't further clarify, but on [Dec. 15](#), three representatives from AHSAA member private schools were granted 15 minutes before the AHSAA

Central Board of Control to present on issues facing AHSAA private schools.

The [Montgomery Advertiser](#) reported a few days later that the AHSAA was discussing a model that could split member private and public schools into divisions for postseason competition.

With the reclassification announcement inching closer, AHSAA member schools are closely watching for developments, but what about the other high school association in Alabama? The Alabama Independent School Association serves 101 private schools, so what does the AISA think about the whirlwind of events transpiring around AHSAA reclassification?

What is the AISA's perspective on possible AHSAA private-public split?

For the AISA, whether discussion of a public-private AHSAA split will have a negative or positive impact is one for the AHSAA to answer.

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"From our perspective, the issue is far more complex than a simple public versus private distinction, and any potential outcomes would depend on a wide range of operational, financial and competitive factors," AISA executive director Michael McLendon told the [Montgomery Advertiser](#).

To McLendon and the AISA, such a structural change would affect scheduling, travel costs, officiating, governance, playoff formats and longstanding relationships between schools.

AISA perspective on issues facing AHSAA private schools

The AISA offers more for its member schools than athletics. Academic-related services such as accreditation, student competitions and professional development are a few examples of how the AISA serves its schools outside of athletics.

Twenty-six schools served by the AISA participate in AHSAA athletics. Schools like Montgomery Academy, St. James, Bayside Academy and Houston Academy are among the AISA members on the academic side of the coin but take part in athletics with the AHSAA.

"Ultimately, our focus is on what is best for our member schools and the student-athletes they serve," McLendon said. "AISA's role remains clear: to support and advocate for our member schools in whatever capacity is needed."

The AISA has been an advocate for its AHSAA-member private schools on the topic of the AHSAA's interpretation of the CHOOSE Act.

The CHOOSE Act makes refundable income tax credits available to help cover tuition, tutoring and any other educational expenses. The AHSAA interprets the CHOOSE Act as a form of financial aid, and under its bylaws, students who transfer schools using CHOOSE Act funds have to sit out athletic participation for one year.

On Sept. 4, Gov. Kay Ivey sued the AHSAA over its interpretation of the CHOOSE Act. A day later, the AHSAA was hit with a temporary restraining

order preventing it from enforcing any rule that makes acceptance of CHOOSE Act funds the sole reason for making a student ineligible to play sports.

Does the AISA want AHSAA cross-play?

Alabama is one of few states that doesn't allow regular-season between respective athletic associations, meaning AHSAA members cannot compete against non-member AISA schools or athletes from those schools. It's one of the solutions AHSAA private-school representatives presented to the board of control. It's something McLendon wishes would change, and something for which the AISA has been advocating for more than a decade.

"Allowing cross-play would reduce travel costs, strengthen local rivalries and preserve competitive relationships that often begin in youth sports and continue through high school," McLendon said.

"In fact, if cross-play had existed over the past several decades, the current public-private tensions we are seeing today would likely not exist."

McLendon points Mississippi, South Carolina, North Carolina and Virginia as examples of states that have regular-season cross-play between schools in private and state associations. To McLendon, this approach has allowed the two associations to coexist and operate successfully with little public-private controversy.

Would AISA benefit from an AHSAA public-private split?

If the AHSAA takes action that upsets its member private schools — whether that be putting public and private schools in separate divisions or not addressing other private-school concerns — the AISA's executive director says the organization is always open to receiving schools into its membership.

"We remain open and welcoming to any non-public schools seeking membership and are committed to fostering a strong, collaborative association that represents the diverse needs of Alabama's private school community," McLendon said.