



Alaska State Legislature

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SPONSOR STATEMENT

HB 15

An Act relating to prevention and evaluation of and liability for traumatic brain injuries in student athletes

More than 60,000 high school student athletes sustain concussions each year. The number is much greater when you include middle school and younger children. The National Football League has recently begun focusing on concussions and brain trauma, raising public awareness of this serious problem, and many states are now moving to add protections for students who participate in sports or other potentially dangerous activities. While concussions and brain trauma are more prevalent in football, many other sports and activities are also dangerous, with girls' soccer resulting in the second-most concussions.

A concussion results from the brain striking the inside of the skull, and can be caused by a blow to the head, or by violent motion of the head. Though the risk can be somewhat reduced with a helmet, it cannot be prevented with external equipment. While it is nearly impossible to completely prevent an initial concussion or brain trauma, this legislation seeks to minimize complications and more permanent conditions that can be caused when athletes continue to practice or play after receiving a concussion.

HB 15 is modeled after legislation that recently passed in Washington State, known as the Zackery Lystedt Law. Zackery was a middle-school football player who was returned to a game after suffering a concussion. He sat out for about 15 minutes, and then returned to the game, forcing a game-saving fumble, but suffering a further head injury on the play. The second injury caused a brain hemorrhage that ultimately led to the removal of both sides of Zackery's cranium, leaving him drifting in and out of a coma for three months. He has battled his way back to some sense of normalcy, but will never fully recover from this avoidable injury.

HB 15 simply requires school districts, in consultation with the Alaska School Activities Association, to develop and publish guidelines and information to educate coaches, student athletes and parents about the nature and risks of concussions and traumatic brain injuries. The bill will require that a student athlete suspected of suffering a concussion or brain trauma be removed from practice or play, and not be allowed to return until cleared by a licensed health care professional.

While there is no way to completely prevent concussions or traumatic brain injuries, we can strive to prevent the serious complications and potentially life-altering or life-threatening ramifications that can occur from continuing to practice or compete once a brain injury has occurred. This is a critical public health issue, and a responsibility to our children we should take seriously.

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