

Column by Joe Nathan

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As the school year begins, parents and educators across the nation are battling an unexpected obstacle in the road to better schools. That barrier is the National Collegiate Athletic Association - NCAA - which has set up itself up as a sort of unelected "super school board in the sky." The NCAA's astonishing rulings hurt thousands of outstanding students, and frustrated educators who are trying to improve high schools. How did the NCAA - known for running college sports and the "Final Four" basketball tournament, get in this position? Founded in 1906, the NCAA took in more than \$247 million, last year much of it from TV contracts. The NCAA wants to protect its revenue and prestige. About ten years ago, the NCAA was embarrassed when several professional athletes announced that despite attending well-known universities, they could barely read. Some announced that they were using part of their million dollar salaries to hire reading tutors. Congress stepped in, demanding that the NCAA act, or Congress would. The NCAA created college entrance test minimum scores, and minimum grade point averages for any high school student who wished to participate in college sports, or accept an athletic scholarship.

Raising standards is a worthy goal. But then the NCAA departed from concentrating on what students know and can do - it decided to try to assess every English, Social Studies, Math and Science course offered by every one of the nation's high schools.

Hurting deserving students

The NCAA has delayed or denied university athletic opportunities for class valedictorians, National Honor Society members, even a National Merit Scholar. Why? Because the NCAA rejected as few as one of their high school courses. For example:

- Amber

Hofstad's fantastic test scores and grades made her a National Merit Scholar. because of her extraordinary grades and test scores. But the NCAA prevented her from running cross country at Michigan Tech because it questioned a high school course she took.

- Dan

Zien of suburban Milwaukee earned a B average and very high test scores. But the NCAA told blocked his track scholarship at Indiana University because it questioned a single high school English course he took (despite accepting the identical from some high schools).

- The

Air Force Academy accepted Chris Rohe , who earned a 3.97 grade point

average and high test scores. But because the NCAA rejected 1/3 of his required 10th grade English class, he was not allowed to play football during his freshman year.

- Yale

University accepted Alison Rosholt during the fall of her senior year because she had outstanding grades and test scores. But her parents battled with the NCAA for months before the NCAA would allow her to try out for Yale's tennis team.

- Rebecca

Burt's mother had to drive hundreds of miles to pick her up at a Kansas University because the NCAA blocked her track scholarship. Although her grades and test scores were well above the minimums, the NCAA rejected her "tech-prep" chemistry class - a class which attempts to related principles of chemistry to the real world.

Frustrating talented, committed teachers

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NCAA often has rejected this kind of applied, hands on class which researchers recommend. The National Association of State Boards of Education calls the NCAA "far behind the curve" in understanding research-based high school reforms.

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NCAA rejected an Elk River, Minnesota course in which students write extensively, and interview community members about how they use writing. The NCAA's 3 sentence memo rejecting this course had three grammatical mistakes. David Flannery, superintendent of Elk River, calls the NCAA "the most arrogant, obstinate, frustrating group I've ever dealt with." He's not alone. Ken Gunn, principal in Walnut, California and immediate past president of the California (high school) interscholastic organization, says "The NCAA has created a monster." Michael Bonnaci, principal at an excellent suburban Pittsburgh high school has spent months battling the NCAA over courses developed by a teacher who was named National Council Social Studies 1997 secondary teacher of the year. More than 20 of the nation's attorneys general are encouraging the NCAA to change. But the NCAA continues over-ruling recommendations from high schools and states. Recently four National Teachers of the Year, and more than 100 other school reform authorities, from across the political spectrum, wrote that the "NCAA's goals are worthy. But their methods are wretched." The NCAA ought to be encouraging high school reform, rather than frustrating it.

Why

is the NCAA doing these things? The NCAA insists its goal is better prepared students. It accurately points out that every high school course doesn't challenge students. But instead of focusing on what students know, it has decided to impose a highly questionable set of standards on students and schools. The NCAA's standards reject, for example, any social studies class which spends more than 25% of its studying current issues. Ironically, the NCAA accepts any course a

college counts toward a degree. As Bob Pasco, a Vermont School Counselor who has battled the NCAA for a couple of years observes, "The NCAA is confused. It should try to be rigorous. It has settled for being rigid."