

October 16, 2000

TO: Athletic Directors
SISC II Member Districts

FROM: Catherine Wilson Jones, CSP
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SUBJECT: A New Dimension to Sports Liability

Several recent cases provide a clear message regarding the responsibility of teachers, coaches, and school districts regarding sports/physical education liability.

The first case involves a wrestling incident in which the referee-instructor injured a high school student while attempting to show him a wrestling move. Three other cases involve injuries resulting from a tag game, a touch football game, and a basketball game—all involving the supervising adult as a participant.

Supervision may be general or specific, and often includes directing, teaching and demonstrating proper techniques. In considering allegations of negligent supervision, the courts have been consistent in determining whether the teacher or coach acted as a reasonably prudent person would have acted in similar circumstances. The courts have not supported supervisors who have engaged in active participation that rose to the level of one-on-one competition. In such situations, the teacher or coach may have abandoned his role of supervisor and become an equal competitor with the participant.

Although quality instruction can involve “hands-on” techniques, the teacher or coach must be mindful of the distinction between instruction versus participation. It is inappropriate for a teacher, coach, or other adult supervisor to engage a student in a physical activity as an equal participant or “peer”. It is also inappropriate for an adult to push the limits of physical intensity in an activity in order to “motivate” students.

Those adults that favor the role of participant over instructor and supervisor should be reminded of the increased liability they create for the district. Injuries in sports are common; however, students should never be injured because of competition/participation with an adult coach or teacher.

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