

# The Times

## Opinion: All N.J. should have concussion management programs for student athletes



Randolph seventh grade football players, Jets owner Woody Johnson, State Sen. Richard Codey and former NFL players watch Gov. Chris Christie sign a bill aimed at preventing concussions in student-athletes across New Jersey's interscholastic youth sports programs. (Aristide Economopoulos/The Star-Ledger)

By Dr. Emil L. Matarese

High school athletes across New Jersey soon will be sizing up their shin guards, strapping on their football helmets and stretching their limbs to protect themselves from injury.

However, few of our schools will be doing all that is necessary to protect these young athletes from potential brain injury.

I hear frequently that an athletic injury was "just" a concussion. Yet, concussions are traumatic brain injuries — and they all must be taken seriously.

Permanent brain injuries and death have occurred when athletes with concussions were allowed to return to play before they were fully healed. A second impact to an unhealed brain can be lethal. Even a seemingly minor concussion can potentially produce permanent brain injury.

New Jersey law requires that students be pulled from sports if they experience a concussion. They can return only when they have been cleared by a

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health care professional. It's a good law, but I believe we must go beyond the law to provide state-of-the-art evaluation and treatment for our young athletes. Other states, particularly Pennsylvania, provide aggressive school-based concussion management programs to protect students with concussion.

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I believe all New Jersey schools should have concussion management programs. Computer-based cognitive screening examinations should be administered as a baseline prior to the start of each season. This screening provides a comparison to help determine when a student has recovered and can safely return to play. The simple, computer-based, half-hour evaluation includes measurements of memory, reaction time, comprehension, recall and hand-eye coordination.

Equally important are "return to learn" programs for students recovering from concussion. Students whose brains are still healing should not be thrown back into the classroom without some accommodations, such as starting with half days or being given more time to complete tests. I have seen students return to a full school load and then fail, triggering a downward spiral of poor academic performance and worsening emotional issues. Some of these outcomes might have been avoided with a more accommodating approach.

A school concussion management program should include a team of experts, including representatives from nursing, guidance, academics and athletics. The return should be gradual. We must support these young people and protect them from further injury until they are completely healed.

Only health care providers trained and certified in the evaluation of concussions should clear a student to return to play.

We also need more education to combat the myths of concussion. The crisis in professional football has brought the issue much-needed attention, but it also has contributed to the myth that only those in high-impact contact sports can face brain injury. In my practice, I see patients in high-risk contact sports, such as football and soccer, but I also see cheerleaders, baseball players, runners and bikers.

Another myth is that everyone who suffers a concussion becomes unconscious. Not true. The myriad symptoms can include irritability, sleeplessness, memory loss, headache and nausea — symptoms that can go unnoticed if parents and teachers are not alert and educated.

We can never completely prevent concussions. I want our young people to be physically active and I believe in the value of athletics and competition. However, we have more knowledge and tools today to prevent catastrophic outcomes from concussions.

Concussion management programs are not expensive or difficult to create. The bottom line is education: for coaches, teachers, athletic trainers, parents and the students themselves to recognize the signs of concussion. We all want the same thing — to protect our young people and give them the opportunity to reach their full potential in life. We can and must do more.

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