

Lawmakers want to let students express religion on sports uniforms

By [Ty Tagami](#)

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The disqualification of a high school runner because he wore a head band with a Bible verse has triggered legislation about religious expression on sports uniforms.

The Georgia High School Association opposes [House Bill 870](#), saying that if it becomes law, the organization would be compelled to break the rules of its national governing body.

Lawmakers, reacting to the ejection of a cross-country runner who finished third in a state championship race last year, said they were merely trying to protect freedom of religious expression.

The [West Forsyth High School](#) runner "was just expressing his belief in his Creator," said Sen. Burt Jones, R-Jackson, the lead co-sponsor of companion legislation, [Senate Bill 309](#). "I found that a little bit troubling."

Rep. Brian Strickland, R-McDonough, the lead co-sponsor of HB 870, said the legislation was aimed at the possibility of discrimination. If the association ever undoes its ban on any individual expression on team uniforms, he said, the bill would prohibit discrimination against the religious kind.

Gary Phillips, the executive director of the Association, doesn't read it that way. The language would compel his organization to allow religious expression on uniforms, he said. That would place his group at odds with the National Federation of State High School Associations' prohibition against individual expression — "illegal adornments" — on team uniforms.

"It would quickly become out of control," said Phillips, who testified against the House bill Wednesday and spoke with The Atlanta Journal-Constitution on Friday. "What if a kid wants to wear something on his arm band that says 'I love ISIS?' Under this rule, we would have no way to control that." (ISIS is an al Qaida splinter group occupying parts of Iraq and Syria and known for publicly beheading people.)

He said the runner had been warned before he competed against wearing the head band, which was adorned with a Bible verse and a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

If Georgia doesn't comply with the national federation policy, he said, his [association](#) could lose four seats on the national rule-making body, diminishing this state's influence over high school sports policy.

The two bills contain identical language about uniforms. They prohibit public high schools — nearly 90 percent of the Association's membership — from participating in sporting events under "any athletic association which prohibits religious expression of student athletes"

Rep. Beth Beskin, R-Atlanta, a member of the House Education Committee, questioned the need for the legislation at a hearing Wednesday, noting that the runner reportedly was not ejected specifically because the writing on his head band was religious.

"It's kind of a hypothetical problem at this point," she said. Even so, she and the committee voted to allow the legislation out of committee. The House Rules committee will decide what happens next. It

has some high-powered support, with Rep. Terry England, R-Auburn, as a co-sponsor. He chairs the House Appropriations committee.

The Senate version didn't move out of that chamber's Education and Youth committee.

Both bills also address a secular issue. Currently, the 398 public and 57 private schools in the Association are banned from playing non-association schools, meaning most private schools in Georgia. Even informal scrimmages are forbidden. In rural areas, that leaves many private schools with few opportunities to play.

The bills would ban public high schools from participating in Association events unless the Association changes its rules to allow cross play.

Phillips said his organization has been working for months to make that change. The executive committee signed off on it the morning of Wednesday's legislative hearings, he said, but the full membership must vote, and they only meet twice a year. He said he could "pretty well count on the regular membership to go along with that" when they meet in April.

Strickland isn't willing to wait. He said the legislation merely codifies what the Association is promising to do. He said it's unfair that many private school students get fewer athletic opportunities.

Jimmy Stokes, executive director of the Georgia Association of Educational Leaders, testified against SB 309 Wednesday, urging lawmakers "to be careful about micromanaging private associations."

The former school principal and coach also said uniforms are supposed to promote uniformity. Self expression on them "destroys the concept of uniform," he said.