

Bills target athletic events and religious expression on uniforms

By [Ty Tagami](#)

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New legislation in the Georgia General Assembly takes aim at prohibitions on athletic competitions between public and private schools and at discrimination against religious symbols on sports uniforms — if personal expression ever is allowed on them.

[Senate Bill 309](#) and [House Bill 870](#) are only a few paragraphs long but cover a lot of ground. They would ban state-funded schools from participating in an athletic association that prohibits "religious expression on the clothing of student athletes." The bills also address sporting events.

Sponsors say the legislation is aimed at the Georgia High School Association, and that the main issue is the lack of cross-competition between public and private schools. GHSA does not allow member schools to compete with non-member schools, including private schools, even in informal scrimmages.

The association also bars individual expression on uniforms, religious or otherwise.

Former principal and coach Jimmy Stokes testified in the Senate Education and Youth Committee that the state association was merely following the rules of the national association, and noted that both are private.

"I would ask you to be careful about micromanaging private associations," said Stokes, executive director of the Georgia Association of Educational Leaders. He also said uniforms are supposed to promote uniformity by subsuming the individual within the team. Self expression on a uniform "destroys the concept of uniform," he said.

Rep. Brian Strickland, R-McDonough, the lead co-sponsor of HB 870, said he was prompted to introduce the bill so private schools in rural areas could have someone to play against. He said he'd heard that GHSA was already considering striking its ban on public-private competitions but that his legislation would make it law. He said the part of the legislation on religious expression was ancillary, aimed only at the possibility of discrimination against religious expression.

If GHSA ever allowed private expression on uniforms, he said, the bill would prohibit discrimination against religious expression. He noted a track meet in metro Atlanta where a runner was disqualified after wearing a headband with a Bible verse.

The runner had been warned against wearing the head band because it had writing on it.

Rep. Beth Beskin, R-Atlanta, a member of the House Education Committee, said that since the boy was sanctioned for the head band rather than for the language on it, "It's kind of a hypothetical problem at this point."

Even so, she and the rest of the House committee passed the bill, which now heads to the Rules Committee.

Earlier Wednesday at the Senate committee hearing, Sen. Burt Jones, the lead co-sponsor of SB 309, said he was motivated by the ejection of the student from the track meet.

The runner “was just expressing his belief in his Creator,” and was ejected per the association’s rules, said Jones, R-Jackson. “I found that a little bit troubling.”

The Senate committee did not vote on the bill.