

By Keith McShea - NEWS SPORTS REPORTER
October 9, 2007

Unchartered territory

Section VI running a pilot program for integrating charter school teams

About two weeks ago, students from the Buffalo Academy of Science Charter School lined the hallways and cheered on the school's first varsity team. A handful of students, wearing new jerseys, was about to head to a cross country meet in Eden, the first varsity sporting event in the short history of the 4-year-old school.

The Buffalo Academy of Science Charter School and the Charter School for Applied Technologies are both varsity members of Section VI this year, making it the first school year that charter schools are a major part of Section VI sports.

At CSAT and Buffalo Science, where students are getting excited as the first letter jackets and mascot T-shirts are produced, they've started athletic programs for the same reasons other high schools have them.

"It's about allowing kids to have a better high school experience," said Joel Reed, athletics director at CSAT. "We're promoting lifelong health and the spirit of good competition, and it's allowing students to be more wellrounded and give them experience that will help them move forward in life and in the workplace."

But members of Section VI are concerned with how schools get their students and the fact that charter schools have no geographic boundaries, the same kind of concerns that have kept Catholic schools out of Section VI.

With only one other charter school competing in varsity sports in New York State — the Syracuse Academy of Science — the rest of the state is watching how Western New York handles this uncharted territory.

There are a lot of questions about how the charter schools got here and where they're going. Here are a few questions and answers:

Are charter schools public schools?

Yes. That means charter schools have just as much right to be a member of the NYSPHSAA — or any of its 11 sections — as any other public school. The schools are funded in large part by state aid; when students transfer from traditional public schools to charter schools, the state funding for those students follows them to the charter school.

Which schools are competing this year?

The Charter School for Applied Technologies is located on the Town of Tonawanda side of Kenmore Avenue at Vulcan Street. It is fielding varsity teams (as the blue-and-gold Eagles) in the Niagara-Orleans League in cross country, boys and girls basketball, baseball and softball.

The Buffalo Academy of Science Charter School is located at 190 Franklin St. The Wolverines — also blue and gold — will have varsity teams competing in ECIC IV in cross country, boys and girls basketball, bowling and track and field.

Are CSAT and Buffalo Science similar when it comes to sports?

Not by a long shot.

CSAT has had a growing athletic program ever since it was founded seven years ago. Its program actually grew as the school did — from inhouse athletics when it was an elementary school, to adding modified programs when it was K-8 and then fielding JV and varsity teams as the school added grades.

CSAT had a varsity cross country team compete in the Niagara Frontier League and the Section VI championships last year. It has started modified programs for boys and girls soccer and even has a long-term growth plan with 2016 as a target date for offering all the sports that the Niagara-Orleans League does.

“Our philosophy was to start from the ground up,” said Reed, the fourth-year athletics director. “Varsity sports in Western New York are very competitive, and we feel as if preparing athletes at an early age would help them be more successful when they got to that [varsity] level.”

Buffalo Science, however, is starting a program this year basically from scratch. When its cross country runners ran that first meet, it was the first competitive running any of them had done. Buffalo Science was to have a girls volleyball team this year but declined since many of its players had never played before and are still learning the game.

The school is starting with varsity right away so upperclassmen who have been at the school will get the chance to compete.

“For kids who have been in our school since it started, they haven’t been able to compete in interscholastic sports,” said second-year AD Anthony Venditti of Buffalo Science. “If we came in with a JV program, we would have freshmen, sophomores and juniors playing but not the seniors who have been deprived of it for four years.”

Are CSAT and Buffalo Science the only local charter schools with varsity programs?

Yes. But more are likely on the way. Oracle Charter School (888 Delaware Ave.), Tapestry Charter School (40 North St.) and Western New York Maritime Charter School (266 Genesee St.) have all been represented at recent Section VI meetings and some have growing athletic programs. There are 15 charter schools in Western New York, all but three of them in Buffalo.

Do charter schools have geographic boundaries?

This is hot button question No. 1 in Section VI, which has often cited that very issue as part of the reasoning for keeping Catholic schools out of the section.

The answer is yes and no. Charter schools’ enrollment is free and based on an application process (application forms are readily available on school Web sites). Some schools accept applications from students throughout Erie and Niagara Counties. Admission is based on a lottery system, and schools must first accept students from the district in which they are located before extending offers to students from other areas.

“That’s always an issue,” ECIC President Jim Biryła said of charter schools not having borders. “The point is they have that potential [to draw students from other areas] and we don’t. But we know in the public schools, we don’t have that potential.”

“Yes, we’re a school without boundaries, but that’s to attract students to a more successful learning experience,” Reed said. “Athletics are the frosting on top of the cake that allows kids to have a better high school experience.”

Do charter schools recruit?

Hot button question No. 2. When some charter schools start up, or when existing schools’ enrollment falls, they actively recruit applicants. Some have even gone door to door.

But Reed — whose CSAT, same as Buffalo Science, currently has a waiting list of prospective students — said recruiting students for sports would endanger their charter.

“There’s no opportunity for us to recruit,” Reed said. “For us to recruit — the way New York State has put restrictions on recruiting, we could lose our charter.”

What are charter schools?

Charter schools receive public funding but have far greater flexibility than traditional public schools (in areas ranging from hiring and payment of teachers to scheduling longer school days or school years to designing a unique curriculum). The schools are run by community or parent groups who apply for charters from the state, and have to maintain certain levels of performance in order to keep the five-year licenses.

Are charter schools competing across the state?

There is only one other varsity program competing in the state. The Syracuse Academy of Science, located in that city's downtown, has been a varsity member of Section III for two years in cross country, track and boys and girls basketball.

"They applied for admission to our Onondaga League, which is the league where it is located," said Section III's Dawn Field. "There was some resistance from the league, but under sectional bylaws, a school is required to be in a league, and if no league will take them, the section will place them."

Field said other schools were apprehensive of the charter school entering the section but that, "since the initial fervor quieted down, they've been just another school."

That also makes Section VI one big guinea pig. Other sections in the state are watching to see how it handles the whole process.

Section VI has an ad hoc committee on charter schools, while the state itself is still researching how it will classify them.

"We're still in the process of fully understanding charter schools and how they are organized, and once we have that understanding, we can propose some process in which we can classify those schools," said NYSPHSAA president Nina Van Erk.

Why is CSAT in the Niagara-Orleans League?

While a team from Tonawanda heading to the likes of Albion and Medina doesn't sound like a great fit, it actually is because the needs of CSAT and the N-O are both met. CSAT gives the N-O eight schools; the league was left with seven schools (and imbalanced schedules) since Starpoint left for the ECIC in 2004. CSAT had been competing in the large-school NFL in modified and junior varsity programs in recent years and thinks the N-O's smaller schools (and, in turn, the competition level) will make for a better fit.

"The NFL was great for us, but it was frustrating at times because there was such a difference in size and the talent pool to draw from," said Reed. "Now we're with schools that are more our size (400-450 students are in CSAT's high school grades) and competition level. The Niagara-Orleans was very open-armed and very excited."

Why is Buffalo Science in ECIC IV?

Venditti said the leadership of Buffalo Science asked him to ask Section VI to place the school in a league other than the Buffalo Public Schools and that he wasn't told why.

It might have something to do with charter schools and public schools often having a fractious relationship since charter schools draw both students and money from existing public schools.

With Section VI required to find a place for Buffalo Science, it seems that the ECIC was the only option. The section's ad hoc committee on charter schools recommended Buffalo Science be placed in ECIC last March and the board approved that move last May. The ECIC appealed the placement of Buffalo Science to the state to no avail.

"In the future, we're probably going to have to take them in," said Buffalo Public Schools Athletics Director Dave Thomas. "I'm not against taking them in, but I'll wait until the superintendent gives me the go-ahead. They left the city school system and suddenly now they want to come back to us. That's the reason they have charter schools ... someone has dissatisfaction with how the city schools are run, or else they would have stayed."

"But these are Buffalo schoolchildren, and we and the superintendent will do the best for them."

Why did ECIC file an appeal with the state about the placement of the Buffalo Academy of Science in their league?

"There's no animosity whatsoever," said ECIC president Jim Biryła, who is the principal at Holland. "We were appealing due process. [The Section] put together a draft of procedures regarding charter schools based on geographic locations. ... to not incorporate that [draft] before they made the vote didn't seem right.

"This [charter schools] is a definite gray area because it's never been done before. I think it's important that every precedent we set is the right precedent."

What does Buffalo Science's presence mean for ECIC IV teams?

For the better basketball teams in the league - such as 2006 state champion Lackawanna boys and the defending state champion East Aurora girls ... its presence means their schedule takes a hit. With the inclusion of the first-year program in their division, all teams have to give up two nonleague games. The power rankings for basketball sectionals will also suffer since Buffalo Science will be the only Class D school in a league which includes A, B and C schools.

Then there's the matter of competition. Imagine a start-up program taking on five-time defending state champion girls volleyball team in Eden, a defending state champion cross country team in East Aurora or the aforementioned recent state champions in basketball.

"You might have kids that want to play high school sports, but you've still got to present a decent program," Thomas said. "Just because kids can play basketball, that doesn't make you a program."

Do schools have to be placed in leagues?

Yes, unless a school specifically asks to be an independent.

"Once a school is a member of our association, they are entitled to league affiliation," said Van Erk.

Being in a league obviously helps with scheduling. Buffalo Science's current basketball schedules on its Web site consist only of its ECIC IV schedules and include no nonleague games.

What does the future hold?

No one really knows, which is why the state and section have committees feeling their way through these unprecedented issues.

More charter schools will likely attain varsity status. Given the number of charter schools in Buffalo, the schools might be able to form their own league.

"If there are five or six schools which can form their own charter school league within the section, that seems ideal and a natural fit for them and everyone involved," said Biryła.

kmc Shea@buffnews.com