

# YOUTH,

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tough to quantify enjoyment or fun, but certainly sports specialization plays a role, as well as the threat of being injured.”

While the Ad-Hoc Committee has zero authority over the youth leagues, they put out their position statement a little over a year ago that featured several recommendations that they wanted youth leagues to consider.

Before Gragg joined the Ad-Hoc Committee, Gragg claims that he sent some of the committee's recommendations to personnel at McNary Youth Football as “food for thought.”

Gragg believes that if youth programs adjusted their model to fit within the Ad-Hoc's recommendations, that programs would be safer and might start to see more growth.

“It gives us the opportunity to provide an age appropriate, safe, environment for kids to be successful and have fun playing football and hopefully increase numbers,” Gragg said.

At an Ad-Hoc meeting during the fall, there was a discussion about how to reward youth programs that align with their position statement. Garrett said that youth programs that comply with the Ad-Hoc Committee's position statement, could be considered as “blue ribbon” schools.

OSAA member schools also reserve the right to require compliance from anyone who uses their facilities.

In December, Gragg attended a Salem-Keizer athletic directors meeting and suggested that the school district consider using the Ad-Hoc position statement as a conditional use for district facilities.

“I had made the statement that this was something I would like to do at McNary. And that led to a discussion where the majority of athletic directors said that this was a good direction. I wouldn't say it was unanimous, but most of the athletic directors said that this made sense,” Gragg said. “This wasn't driven by me, but it was suggested by me.”

District officials met with the high school coaches in the Salem-Keizer area in mid-December to notify them of the possible changes. According to Gragg, coaches were unanimously in support of flag football being played in grades K-4 and a majority of the coaches support the movement towards fifth and sixth

graders play at that level is way too much of a jump.

“From I understand from reading everything about it, rookie-tackle is like tee-ball for football. It's the introductory level to tackle football. Are we really going to have fifth and sixth graders playing at a tee-ball level?” Hughes said.

Walker also had a major problem with holding a public hearing at 9 a.m. on a weekday.

“The only reason you do a hearing at 9 a.m. is that you don't want people to show up. You do it when

people are least available to come comment,” Walker said.

Gragg admitted that he wished that he had worded the email differently.

“The way it was presented, which I totally get, it sounded like a foregone conclusion. Because it was received that way, I think it raised the tension level. I think this ambitious athletic director got his cart ahead of the horse a little bit,” Gragg said. “It was way too formal. The invitation was way too formal. When I used formal language, people's response was that they needed to make their voices heard.”

Instead of having a public hearing on the morning of Jan. 9, Gragg met with Salem-Keizer TYFL presidents on Monday, Jan. 6, along with Kraig Sproles and Larry Ramirez — who are both members of the Salem-Keizer School District's cabinet.

“We had a very good conversation. Our intent was to go in there and just listen and hear what people's concerns were and where they were coming from. We wanted to get all the information that we could. It was a three-hour long meeting, but it was really good,” Gragg said. “Tualatin

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— Kyle Hughes,  
McNary Youth Football President

grade teams implementing rookie tackle football.

Programs that played Tualatin Youth Football League (TYFL), which is the biggest youth football organization in the state, would be most affected by this proposal. All six high schools have youth programs that compete in the TYFL and use the facilities of their respective high schools — even though each youth program has no direct affiliation with any of the high schools.

On Dec. 19, Gragg relayed this information about what the district was considering in an email to all the presidents of Salem-Keizer TYFL organizations.

In the email, Gragg also invited TYFL board members to a public hearing with the option of providing testimony on Thursday, Jan. 9 at 9 a.m.

The message did not sit well with people involved with McNary Youth Football for multiple reasons.

TYFL had just made the change in 2019 to have all third and fourth graders play rookie tackle football. McNary Youth Football President Kyle Hughes believes that now making fifth and sixth

Valley Football is one of the safest, if not the safest program in the state. They already have rookie tackle football at the third and fourth grade level, which is a safer, developmentally appropriate model for transitioning between flag and tackle football. Safety is of the utmost concern to them. They do a fantastic job.”

At the meeting, the school district agreed to put a pause on the efforts to impose the Ad-Hoc Committee's recommendation.

“We're not that far off in ideals between the two organizations,” Gragg said.

A press release on the McNary Youth Football website says that the area's TYFL presidents “had a good conversation with the school district officials” in regard to the Jan. 6 meeting.

Walker, however, had a different interpretation of the conversation that took place.

“We're not close. We're not close at all. If Scott thinks we're close, he's not reading that meeting right,” Walker said.

TYFL President Bob Merwin currently has no plan to make changes to the structure of the league. Merwin says that Salem-Keizer officials are the only ones in the state trying to force the Ad-Hoc Committee's recommendation upon their local youth leagues.

If the Salem-Keizer School District decides to enforce the changes, it's likely that TYFL wouldn't have a presence in the area any longer, meaning that local youth teams couldn't compete against teams from outside the area until seventh grade.

“We think that our model is the ideal model. Nobody in the country is doing rookie-tackle at fifth and sixth grade, and very few are doing it for third and fourth grade. To me, it just doesn't make any sense,” Merwin said.

Even though safety is the primary concern of the Ad-Hoc Committee's proposal, Walker is more worried that the potential changes would make youth football less safe.

“When the the third and fourth graders who are playing rookie-tackle are learning how to tackle, they are learning to tackle properly and they can't really do damage to one another. They are hitting each other so softly. So by the time they get to fifth and sixth grade, and especially seventh and eighth grade, the physics of the game change and have much higher speeds, but they already know how to safely play the game,” Walker said. “When you delay that process, they aren't going to be prepared. Because the competition is playing 11-man everywhere else, I think it makes the game less safe.”

Hughes, on the other hand, is concerned about kids in the Salem-Keizer area not being competitive when they get to high school and face out-of-town competition. The McNary High varsity football team won the Mountain Valley Conference for a second straight season in 2019, but they have lost each of their non-league games over the last two years by an average of nearly 30 points per game.

“I think there will be a two-tiered football system, which I think is really unfortunate. What some kids will probably do is join travel teams and they will go set up an all-day tournament up in Portland or Vancouver,” Hughes said. “When they get into the seventh grade and start playing against the other kids in Salem-Keizer that are just being introduced to real tackle football, they will destroy those kids and they'll never want to go on the field again and you end up getting the opposite of what you want.”

There are current varsity head coaches on the Ad-Hoc Committee that are hoping to get other varsity coaches in the state to jump on board with the group's message.

“Kids in the lower grades don't need to be playing tackle. They need to learn the fundamentals of the game, get out and play some flag football and just learn about the sport,” said Bill Singler, the head coach at

South Medford — a program that McNary has faced in each of the last two seasons.

McNary High football coach Jeff Auvinen admitted that he has mixed feelings on the situation.

“Both sides are a little adversarial with each other, which is sad because I believe they both want what's best for kids. I'm not usually a fence-sitter, but I can honestly see where both sides are coming from. I think the district is hoping that if they make this arrangement, other areas and leagues will follow. Participation has been declining for a while now, but if you don't change anything, how will it improve?” Auvinen said.

While there isn't anything set in stone past the 2020 season, Gragg believes that this issue will eventually be resolved.

“I know that Tualatin Valley and McNary Youth Football want what is best for kids. When we all have that as our foundation, the outcome is going to be good. It might just take some time. With that as the foundation, I think everyone will be understanding of the end result,” Gragg said. “My hope is that whatever we are doing on campus here will lead to an increase in numbers and it leads to increase in kids that are having a blast and will continue to play football. That is the outcome that I want.”

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