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### **Philadelphia School District Sports Teams Seek To Participate In Statewide Competition For The First Time In 106 Year History Of The Public League**

**PHILADELPHIA** -- The School District of Philadelphia moved a step closer to making sports history today by announcing its intention to join the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association, Inc. (PIAA).

"Joining the PIAA typifies the broader school reform effort," said School District of Philadelphia Chief Executive Officer Paul G. Vallas. "This is a new era in the School District's administration, one in which the District is a full partner with the state. Our students will be the beneficiaries through better recruitment opportunities, broader recognition of talent, and introduction to other regions of the state, while becoming ambassadors for our fine city."

For more than 100 years, the School District has been in a league of its own in operating its Public League, which consists of 36 Philadelphia high school teams that have historically competed only against each other in various sports. Occasionally, Philadelphia student athletes have had the opportunity to compete against suburban and parochial schools in special competitions. The District has never had the opportunity to participate in statewide competitions.

The Public League anticipates submitting its applications for membership to the PIAA Board of Directors in March 2003. Walter J. Blucas, President of PIAA said, "Approval will most likely take place at the Friday, March 21, 2003 meeting of the Board of Directors. PIAA has been waiting a long time for Philadelphia to join its ranks. Now for the first time in 90 years, PIAA can call its championship contests a true state championship."

The PIAA currently has 11 separate districts. The Public League will become District 12, effective July 12, 2003, if the PIAA Board of Directors approves all 36- membership applications. Meanwhile, the School District of Philadelphia will hold its own Public League Championship competition during the 2003-2004 school year under the PIAA District 12 banner, but will not be eligible to compete in the statewide competition until July 1, 2004. This will allow the PIAA to finish its two-year reclassification cycle and give Philadelphia high schools a transitional period to conform to the PIAA Constitution, By-Laws, Policies and Procedures, and Rules and Regulations. District 12 championship teams will be eligible for state competition in the 2004-2005 school year.

PIAA requires student athletes to pass at least four full credit subjects or the equivalent. Philadelphia's eligibility requirements are already within those standards. "Joining PIAA will put more emphasis on our student athletes' progress in the classroom because under PIAA rules, they will be required to report their academic progress weekly as opposed to quarterly. If they are failing, they are immediately ineligible for the following week's competition," Vallas said.

The School District of Philadelphia is currently exploring even tougher academic standards than imposed by the PIAA, including a higher mandatory GPA.

James E. Nevels Chair of the School Reform Commission said, "These young people are our ambassadors, we want them to reflect the highest ideals of the School District, on and off the playing field." As a former high school scholar athlete, Nevels knows first hand the value of interscholastic athletics. "We expect to have champions not only on the court, but also in the classroom," said Nevels.

Natalye Paquin, the District's Chief of Staff will spearhead the effort to bring the District into compliance with PIAA regulations. Vallas said, "Natalye demonstrated ambitious vision, as she was the first to identify the need for the District to pursue statewide athletic competition."

Deputy Chief Academic Officer, Creg E. Williams, noted the road to joining the PIAA is not a short one. "There are many steps we must take to enter the ranks of the PIAA. We will need a true team effort system - wide for this initiative to be successful. I look forward to working with our many coaches, teachers, and students to make this happen," said Williams.

Philadelphia's junior highs and middle schools will not join the PIAA at this time, but may join at a later date.

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