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ALABAMA HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION

February 24, 2022

The Honorable Kay Ivey
Governor of the State of Alabama
Alabama State House
11 South Union Street
Montgomery, AL 36130

Dear Governor Ivey:

I am in receipt of your letter dated February 22, 2022, to the Alabama High School Athletic Association (AHSAA) expressing concerns you have about the "alleged treatment of Oakwood Adventist Academy (Oakwood) at the Class 1A Boys' Northeast Regional Basketball Semi-Finals" on February 19, 2022. While AHSAA guidelines do not normally allow me to respond to outside inquiries about student eligibility or actions assessed to member schools, as the Honorable Governor of the State of Alabama, I felt a response would be important in this case.

1. Is the public narrative about Oakwood's treatment accurate?

Oakwood's membership in the AHSAA is 100% voluntary. In 2017, Oakwood requested full membership into the AHSAA. Although Oakwood had been an associate member for three years, they desired to become a full member which would allow them to participate in championship play. To be a full member, a private school must sponsor a minimum of five male and five female sports to be assigned area and region opponents. As a result, Oakwood committed to sponsor boys' and girls' basketball, boys' soccer, girls' volleyball, boys' and girls' cross country, and boys' and girls' indoor and outdoor track. Because championship events in the aforementioned sports are held on Fridays and Saturdays, the AHSAA Central Board of Control had questions about Oakwood participating since their school is a Seventh Day Adventist organization that recognizes the Sabbath from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. Therefore, Oakwood agreed to follow the rules of the AHSAA and agreed to participate in all playoff games without petition, or forfeit. This statement was provided to the AHSAA in writing, and the AHSAA responded, in writing, accepting their agreement to participate in championship play, without petition, or forfeit.

Therefore, regardless of news reports and the public narrative that has been created, the AHSAA simply upheld the agreement that was made when Oakwood became a full member.

2. If so, how was this treatment allowed to occur?

The AHSAA has over 414 high schools, 288 middle schools, 150,000 student-athletes and close to 10,000 championship contests in 27 sports for boys and girls. Granting an exemption or making an exception for any reason, every time one is requested, would be chaotic. The member schools write the rules and expect the AHSAA to govern their rules and policies consistently with both public and private members.

3. Which AHSAA employees were responsible for making this decision? Were any board members consulted about the decision before it was made? Were any other external stakeholders consulted before the decision was made? What discussions were had, and what communications were exchanged, by the responsible AHSAA employees before making the decision?

An Assistant Director first spoke with Oakwood. Following that communication, the Associate Executive Director (AED) followed with information discussed within the July 2017 Central Board meeting when Oakwood presented their request for full membership. In addition, the AED sent Oakwood administration copies of Oakwood's 2017 agreement kept on file that they (Oakwood) provided in order to become a full member of the AHSAA. All discussions between the Assistant and Associate Director and Oakwood administration were shared with the Executive Director. The Central Board President was informed by the Executive Director about the communications.

4. Did the decision to deny Oakwood a religious accommodation violate any existing AHSAA policies? Or was the denial of a religious accommodation for Oakwood permissible under AHSAA's existing policies?

AHSAA's decision did not violate AHSAA rules. The AHSAA was simply standing with the agreement made between Oakwood and the AHSAA.

5. Were you or other AHSAA officials aware of how Oakwood's treatment would be perceived by the Oakwood basketball team members and coaches? If not, why did you not factor this into your decision [to] deny Oakwood a simple religious accommodation?

Oakwood agreed in writing to participate in all scheduled playoff games without petition or forfeit when they became a member in 2017. It was our understanding that Oakwood's administration would take responsibility and ownership and explain the situation to the student-athletes, parents, and stakeholders.

6. Were you or other AHSAA officials aware of how Oakwood's treatment would be perceived by the Alabama taxpayers who support and subsidize AHSAA's operations? If not, why did you not factor this into your decision to deny Oakwood a simple religious accommodation?

The AHSAA does not receive any state funding. As discussed above, the AHSAA's decision was based on Oakwood's agreement when they became a member.

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7. How can we as a State ensure that something like this never occurs again?

The AHSAA expressly asked if Oakwood would participate in championship play before Oakwood became a member. Oakwood agreed in writing that they would without petition or forfeit. Furthermore, through the legislative process of the AHSAA, Oakwood, as a member school, has had opportunities to submit proposals to change current bylaws or to create new ones.

On behalf of the Alabama High School Athletic Association, I want to personally thank you for your concern for our student-athletes. I also want to thank you for your continued support of interscholastic athletics that enrich each student's educational experience, develop good citizenship and healthy lifestyles, and promote positive school/community relations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alvin Briggs". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Alvin" and last name "Briggs" clearly distinguishable.

Alvin Briggs
Executive Director

Cc.

AHSAA Central Board of Control