Kent State University students called 24 Ohio high schools to ask a simple question: Does your athletics program have a concussion policy?

In their search, they uncovered what may be the safest athletics program in the country: Youngstown’s East High School said that concussions had not been recorded because they were “not a problem.”

“Our athletic director reports that we have not had a concussion injury for nine years in this school district,” said Mary Carter, Assistant District Records Officer of Youngstown City School District.

Joseph Congeni, Sports Medicine Doctor at Akron Children’s Hospital called the claim “staggering.”

“It’s concerning, because just by nature of what we’re talking about and looking at in other places, a lot of this is, maybe somebody who was well-trained just wasn’t there to be able to see,” Congeni said.

He said that it’s critical for athletic trainers to be present at all times, because they’re trained to spot the symptoms of concussions and recognize their severity. Even the more subtle symptoms can lead to significant brain injuries later, he said, and often concussions don’t cause obvious symptoms loss of consciousness.

Chillicothe High School has an extensive policy that requires parents of injured athletes to be notified and briefed. Athletic staff must also attend courses to keep them abreast of concussions’ dangers and how to respond.

“We require our coaches to possess current first aid training which they are required to renew every two years,” said Jon Saxton, CHS’s superintendent. “In the first aid training sessions, concussion recognition and treatment are specific section of the training.”

Chillicothe’s return-to-play policy includes stages through which an injured player “must remain asymptomatic” before advancing to the next level of practice or play. These range from no physically demanding activity whatsoever, to aerobic activity and strength training, before returning to practice and finally to full-contact play.

Teachers must be notified of the concussion, and adjustments to the student’s curriculum are made if necessary. Every incident is reported in-depth, covering the injury and the athlete’s recovery.

“[Redacted - name of student athlete] was hit multiple times during a football drill at practice.. approx. 5:00,” one incident report said. “Patient was visibly disoriented with some difficulty walking. He reports dizziness and drowsiness.”

The report went on to detail the athlete’s mother picking him up and receiving a head injury fact sheet to care for him. Parent signatures are also required on Chillicothe’s return-to-play forms.

Conversely, Massillon Washington High School, which has one of the top high school football programs in the nation, declined to comment.

Richard Goodright, MWHS’s superintendent, said “no comment” when asked if his school tracks all concussions in games and practice.
Goodright refused to say if he had asked counsel for an assessment on the risk of litigation from concussions. He instead answered that he talks to a legal counsel all the time, and wouldn’t say if litigation from athletic concussions has been addressed at all.

Athletic concussions and their lasting impact have received a great deal of attention over the last several years. This peaked over the summer, when thousands of retired NFL players brought a “mega-lawsuit” against the League for hiding information on the lasting damage of concussions, which, in extreme cases, can include brain damage or death.

Congeni said there’s also been a significant increase in the amount of reported concussions for a few reasons, chief among them this increased awareness.

According to research by the University of Pittsburgh’s Department of Neurological Surgery, more than 62,000 concussions are sustained each year in high-school contact sports. Among college football players, 34 percent have had a concussion and 20 percent have had multiple.

Its findings also said that concussions often cause “significant and sustained neuropsychological impairments in information-processing speed, problem solving, planning, and memory,” and that multiple concussions make these impairments more severe.

With so much new information and attention on concussions, how can schools have no concussion policy? Rather than write their own policy, many schools use a state code established by the Ohio High School Athletic Association.

OHSAA guidelines state that coaches must know the signs of concussions and notify the student’s parents. Students are not allowed to return to play without written authorization from a medical professional, and only a medical professional can determine whether or not a student has been concussed.

Congeni called the OHSAA policy a “strong step in the right direction” and said that it’s been helpful in sports safety for “three full seasons.”

Pietro Demonte, Athletic Director of Brunswick High School, said BHS has been advised of the risk of concussion litigation, but the school has no policy but the OHSAA’s guidelines.

However, Demonte said they take concussions seriously. BHS has a contract with the Cleveland Clinic and has a doctor on site during sporting events. All suspected concussions are referred to either certified trainers or medical technicians.

“We go to extremes here… these are kids,” Demonte said.

But what about litigation? In the wake of greater publicity, have high schools been seeking legal counsel?

“We have been advised on concussions but I don’t have any meeting minutes or advisory material for you,” said Christina Dinklocker, Mogadore High School’s superintendent. “Like anything else, we just read it, learn it and throw it away.”

Dinklocker added that MHS follows OHSAA guidelines.

Ultimately, the issue of responsibility isn’t easily solved. Often, Congeni said, schools that don’t have their own policies or their own first aid training programs can’t afford to implement them. But it’s not all about facilities or equipment, he said.
“When it comes to safety issues related to sport(s), the number one line item that I’m most interested in isn’t a box of tape, isn’t one piece of equipment,” Congeni said. “It’s an athletic trainer who’s very well-trained to help keep people safe.”

Hyperlinks:

“Department of Neurological Surgery”: http://www.neurosurgery.pitt.edu/trauma/concussion.html


“Ohio High School Athletic Association”:

The Youngstown quote by Mary Carter links to the Youngstown school document, which will be hosted…somewhere? (Karl said to specify this.)