

## Passaic Valley High School hopes policy will decrease brain injuries in athletes

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LITTLE FALLS — In two sentences, Tom Romeo, a lineman for the Passaic Valley High School Hornets, summed up the athlete's ethic that brain injury specialists are trying to fight in their push to prevent concussions among student athletes.



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**U.S. Rep. Bill Pascrell, right, was joined by Passaic Valley High School football players Tom Romeo and Dan Webb to discuss a policy that makes pre-concussion brain testing mandatory for all student-athletes.**

"You never want to leave the field," said Romeo, a senior. "If you're being called from the field, you're devastated."

On Friday, U.S. Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr., D-Paterson, and U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., commended the school for its new policy that requires all student athletes to submit to tougher testing. Adopted two weeks ago by the Board of Education, the policy will put each athlete through a brain-activity baseline test at the beginning of the season. Medical personnel could then compare those results with test results for athletes who sustain head injuries in the school's contact sports.

Carlo Spinella, president of the Passaic Valley Board of Education, said the district is the first in Passaic County to mandate such testing through a written policy. School districts around the state and country take different approaches on how to test for concussions and, more importantly, how to keep a concussed student from lacing up their cleats or sneakers. The launch of the high school's testing program is being funded by a private grant.

"Congratulations, you picked up the right tool for the right job," said Joanna Boyd, public education coordinator for the Brain Injury Association of New Jersey. "And, that is a leap in getting a handle on this."

Passaic Valley already has started using the ImPACT testing system and is among dozens of private and public schools in New Jersey to monitor student athletes through his tool. The mandatory baseline testing for all student athletes is something Pascrell and Menendez are pushing for at the federal level.

Dr. Rosemarie Scolaro Moser, director of Sports Concussion Center of New Jersey, walked legislators through the testing on Friday. She said the numbers of high school and middle school students who have sustained concussions are startling. Her group surveyed 225 students from around the state and found that 63 percent had suffered at least one concussion.

The press conference on Friday was meant to highlight the importance of this issue before Super Bowl weekend. But the legislators pointed to the tragic death of a local football player.

In 2008, Montclair High School's Ryne Dougherty suffered a brain hemorrhage during a tackle at a game against Don Bosco Prep in Ramsey. He died two days later, never having regained consciousness. That injury came less than a month after he had suffered a concussion.

“It’s our responsibility to ensure that what happened to Ryne Dougherty never happens again,” said Menendez.

Pascrell introduced legislation after Dougherty’s death to develop guidelines and protocols for schools to follow when a student has a concussion. The bill would also establish \$5 million in grants for schools to use baseline testing.

Pascrell referenced Dougherty on Friday and commended the Passaic Valley board on its new policy, which will begin in force in September.

“That’s not going to happen here, because Passaic Valley took the initiative to provide baseline testing to every single student,” he said, about the player’s death.

After the event, another Passaic Valley football player agreed that the new policy would help protect players in any sport.

“It’s the same thing as a helmet,” said Dan Webb, a senior linebacker. “It’s there to protect you. It’s a good tool to help.”

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