

Raising the Bar – School Eligibility Standards to Become More Rigorous  
CMAA Project by Steve Haines

*Introduction*

This project will bring change to the current academic eligibility standards for the student-athletes at Seneca High School for the 2014-15 school year. Seneca High School is a school of about 450 students in rural Illinois about 100 miles southwest of Chicago. The student body is made up primarily of poor to middle class white students, but the students, staff and community are steadfast in their support of their school, and its programs. Over 90% of the students are involved in a school activity, whether it be a sports team or club. Seneca High School's programs have had great success at the local, conference, and state levels. One area that Seneca High School needs improvement is in the academic areas. This is not to say that our student-athletes do poorly in the classroom. That could not be further from the truth, but like many schools; the majority of the students are performing at a very high level in the classroom. The problem to be addressed at Seneca High School is the lower level students not being pushed to improve. Currently, the Seneca High School academic eligibility standards are in line with the minimum standards set by the Illinois High School Association (IHSA). The IHSA regulates that each student-athlete must be currently passing 5 courses each week, and if a student-athlete is not passing 5 courses during a given week, then the student-athlete is ruled ineligible for the next week. The following week course grades are checked again if the student-athlete is passing 5 courses then the student-athlete may resume participation, if not the student-athlete remains ineligible and this cycle continues each and every week. Also, the student-athlete must pass 5 courses each semester. If the student-athlete does not pass 5 courses during a semester, then the student-athlete is ineligible for the entire next semester, as time for the student-athlete to earn 5 passing grades in a semester. These regulations may seem to be fair and firm, but as we take a look at how it affects schools in Illinois differently, it is not as it seems. We will take a look at what "passing 5 courses" looks like specifically at Seneca High School. Seneca High School is on an 8-block school day. This format allows the students at Seneca High School to enroll in 8 courses each semester. In other schools, students may only be taking 6 courses or in some cases as few as 5 courses, but at Seneca High School,

our format allows for 8 courses. The IHSA regulations then allow a student-athlete at Seneca High School to fail 3 courses and still be academically eligible to participate in athletics. If we are going to continue to use the term "Student-Athlete", we need to make sure that "Student" comes first in that term. If a student is allowed to fail 38% of the courses enrolled and still be eligible to play athletics, then is Seneca High School requiring enough academically from the student-athletes? The time is now to "Raise the Bar" on the student-athletes of Seneca High School, so that the athletes understand that "Student" comes first.

## Raising the Bar – School Eligibility Standards to Become More Rigorous

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### *Raising the Academic Eligibility Requirements*

During the 2013-14 school year, the Seneca High School administrative team has had many discussions about the number of students receiving grades of D or F, and the current academic eligibility requirements for athletes. Prior to the 2013-14 school year, the number of D's and F's amongst the student-athletes did not seem out of proportion to the rest of the student body, but this past school year it seemed to get a bit out of control. The number of D's and F's being earned by the student-athletes was beginning to seem a little disproportionate to the past years. Also, it seemed to be some of our best athletes earning these grades, and even more disappointing was the number of seniors with those grades. Seniors are supposed to be leaders, on and off the playing field. The regulations as they were in place allowed a student-athlete to earn failing grades in 3 courses and still be eligible. For a select few, that is exactly what they failed. It is a simple case of what is allowed is also acceptable. This could not be further from the case, so the administrative team began to look at ways to stop this trend. Coaches began to assign study tables for the athletes that had earned an F in any class. A program began using National Honor Society students as tutors to help these students in the courses that they were struggling. Each of these worked in some part but it wasn't changing the culture. The culture was that when the students felt like a class was more work or harder than they wanted to work, just stop doing the work. It didn't matter; because, in a sense, all they cared about was being able to participate in athletics. Our administrative team had been working the past few years on ways to increase our academic rigor to our student body with hopes that this would lead to high standardized test scores for our students and school. It appears to be working as students are doing much more in their classes and test scores seem to be on the upswing. Therefore, as the administrative team was discussing the issue we were having with student-athletes not being pushed to perform in the classroom, the idea was born to increase our own academic eligibility standards for the students of Seneca High School. If raising the rigor for the student body had increased performance, then similarly this should work with the student-athletes. If some student-athletes were failing 3 courses because the

system in place allowed them to do so, then it was the thought that allowing fewer failing grades would raise the bar for those students, and fewer failing grades is the desire affect.

The plan was to implement a new academic eligibility policy for the 2014-15 school year. The plan included receiving similar policies from other athletic directors in the state. This took place in early February, 2014. The school received several very good policies and help a great deal with how to proceed and gave some direction as to what the new policy may become. Next, the athletic director developed a preliminary policy that was accepted and endorsed by the administrative team in mid-February, 2014. The following step was to get the coaching staff included in the process. The new policy needed their input and their acceptance if this was going to be successful. The coaching staff was very supportive of increasing rigor of the athletic eligibility standards and like the ideas that the athletic director had put together in the new policy. The athletic director met and discuss the policy with the coaching staff at the February coaches meeting on February, 26, 2014. Next, the policy needed to be approved by the board of education. This process requires two steps. First, the policy needed to looked and endorse by the board's co-curricular committee. The policy was present to this committee on March 12, 2014. Second, the policy had to be approved at a monthly board of education meeting. This presented at the April, 2014 meeting and approved at the May, 2014 meeting. Final steps are to inform the community of Seneca High School and to implement the policy. In May and June, 2014, the new academic eligibility policy has been for review and comment on the Seneca High School website. A copy of the on-line review can been seen in Appendix D. The parents and student-athletes will all be given a presentation at the beginning of each sports season at the seasonal team meetings. The implementation will take place as the school year begins on August 18, 2014. The timeline that Seneca High School used to adopt and implement this policy in in Appendix C.

This new academic eligibility policy will have considerable impact on the students, staff and parents of Seneca High School. This policy will force the student-athletes to increase the production in the classroom for those student that may have been abusing the former system, but may also impact the other student-athletes that may have to compete without some teammates that may not meet the new expectations. Classroom teachers will be impacted as

the student-athletes will be more aware of their grades and requirements than before, this is a good thing. Although the classroom teacher will need to remain current with their grading and paperwork. The coaching staff will be impacted on many levels. The coaches will become more aware of what their student-athletes are doing (or not doing) in their coursework, and just like the students, they will be impacted by possible preparations for contest without student-athletes that do not meet expectations. Parents are impacted as this should force parents to be more involved in the student-athletes grades, homework, projects, etc. If each of these groups are impacted in this way, it will require the students, the teachers, the coaches, and the parents to be more involved in the student-athlete's grades. How can that be a bad thing?

The possible risks involved are few, but they are real. There will be an added cost to the district with the implementation of this policy, and no new personnel is needed as this policy will be executed by the current athletic department. The new academic eligibility policy could and probably will result in more student-athletes missing games due to ineligibility. In no way, did this policy become approved to reduce the athletes being able to participate, but the goal is to reduce the number of failing grades amongst student-athletes. The goal may be reached, and yet still have more students ruled ineligible.

The risks, the demographics, the timeline, the stakeholders, the need, and the purpose have been presented previously. The only thing left to present is the new academic eligibility policy that will be implemented at Seneca High School in the 2014-15 school year. There are many layers to this new policy. This new policy at the surface may seem to be complex, but the policy is more rigorous and is fair to the student-athletes of Seneca High School. First, the academic eligibility requirement for the student-athletes to meet each week. The student-athletes must not be failing more than 1 course each week. The first thing to notice is that the new academic eligibility policy addresses the number of courses that the student-athletes must not be failing instead of the IHSA policy that addresses the number of courses the student-athlete must be passing. If a student-athlete is failing more than 1 course, then the student-athlete is ineligible for a period of 1 week. The current student-athlete's grades are checked each Tuesday, so a student-athletes ruled ineligible will be ineligible from Wednesday to the following Tuesday when grades are checked again. There is no way for a student-athlete that was ruled ineligible

on Tuesday to become eligible before the 1 week period is over. There is one exception to this policy. Each semester each student-athlete gets a 1-time waiver that allows a student-athlete that has 2 failing grades a 2-week waiver from being ruled ineligible to be given the opportunity to raise either or both of the failing grades. If one or both of the failing grades are raised then the student-athlete is not ruled ineligible for any time. But if the student-athletes fails to raise either of the grades, then the student-athlete is subsequently ruled ineligible week to week until at least one of those grades is raised to a passing status. Another layer to this policy is the grading period policy for academic eligibility. First, the definition of grading period as it refers to this academic eligibility policy. At Seneca High School, grading period will be referred to as the 4 "mini" grading period within one semester. The 2014-15 "Mini" grading period dates can be seen in Appendix E. These grading periods are as follows: Start of 1<sup>st</sup> semester to 1<sup>st</sup> quarter progress report date, 1<sup>st</sup> quarter progress reports date to end of 1<sup>st</sup> quarter, start of 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter to 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter progress report date, 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter progress report date to end of 1<sup>st</sup> semester, start of 2<sup>nd</sup> semester to 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter progress report date, 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter progress reports date to end of 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter, start of 4<sup>th</sup> quarter to 4<sup>th</sup> quarter progress report date, 4<sup>th</sup> quarter progress report date to end of 2<sup>nd</sup> semester. The grading period academic eligibility will be checked at the end of each of these "mini" grading periods. If a student-athlete is failing more than 1 course at the end of any of those grading periods, the student-athlete will be ruled ineligible for the entire next "mini" grading period. At the end of the next "mini" grading period, if the student-athlete is failing 1 or less courses, than the student-athlete's eligibility will be reinstated. Again, there is one exception will to this policy. Each semester each student-athlete gets a 1-time waiver that allows a student-athlete that has 2 failing grades a 2-week waiver from being ruled ineligible to be given the opportunity to raise either or both of the failing grades. If the student-athlete has not use the waiver in the semester and the student-athlete is ruled ineligible at the grading period, the student can use the waiver to remain eligible. Yet another layer of this policy is the academic assistance part of this policy. It would seem to be insensitive to the struggles of those student-athletes that school work does not come easy to, if we were to increase the expectations without putting in place academic support to allow students to get the appropriate assistance. The next phase of this academic

eligibility policy is the each Tuesday when student-athlete grades are checked, all students that have earned a failing grade in any class will be called to the athletic director's office. All student-athletes with at least 1 failing grade will be required to take the Seneca Student-Athlete Academic Voucher to the teacher of the failing course(s) to be signed and for the teacher to remark on any coursework missing, late, or upcoming needs for the student-athletes to become aware of. A sample of the voucher can be seen in Appendix B. The last portion of this policy is that we cannot make a policy that does not follow current IHSA policy. We will continue to follow the IHSA academic eligibility requirements as they pertain to the semester grades. The only way a student-athlete can be ineligible for an entire semester is to not meet the IHSA academic eligibility for semester grade, which is that the student-athlete must pass 5 courses. The administrative team feels that this will become a moot policy as the student-athletes must be meeting the previous weekly and grading period academic eligibility will not allow anyone to reach this level of ineligibility. A copy of the parent handout regarding the academic eligibility policy can be seen in Appendix A.

# SENECA TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL

## *Students First; Winning Will Happen...*

### *Academic Eligibility Requirements*

**Purpose: *Students First...***

- ✓ *Raising the expectation will raise the success of our students in the classroom.*
- ✓ *Student/Athlete means student comes first*
- ✓ *To afford students post-secondary extracurricular opportunities (sports and clubs) by qualifying academically for the NCAA and/or NAIA.*

**SEMESTER**

• **IHSA**

- ✓ Students must be passing 25 academic hours (*5 classes*). If this requirement has not been met, the student is ineligible to participate in games/competition for the entire semester.

• **SENECAHS**

- ✓ Must have a 2.0 unweighted GPA or better.

- ❖ If students have a 1.5-1.99 unweighted GPA, students are still eligible to participate in games/competitions, but if the student is failing ONE class the student *must attend academic support sessions as determined* by teacher, coach/sponsor, counselor, and administrator. If these requirements have not been met, students are ineligible until the next grading period.

**GRADING PERIOD**

- **SENECA HS** – Each semester has four “mini” grading periods with the semester. Each is 4.5 weeks, first quarter progress report, end of first quarter, second quarter progress report, and end of semester

- ✓ Students must be passing 25 academic hours (*5 classes*)
- ✓ Must not be failing more than 1 subjects

- ❖ If students are failing more than 1 classes at the conclusion of any of the “mini” grading periods, the students will be ruled ineligible for the entire next “mini” grading period (4.5 weeks)
- ❖ NOTE: See Waiver Rule Below. This rule can be used at a Grading period, option can only be given once per semester

**WEEKLY**

• **IHSA**

- ✓ Students must be passing 25 academic hours (*5 classes*). If this requirement has not been met, the student is ineligible to participate in games/competition for the week, (Thursday – Wednesday)

• **SENECAHS**

- ✓ Eligibility is checked on a weekly basis. (Wednesday)
- ✓ Students must not be failing more than 1 subject. If this requirement has not been met, students are ineligible to participate in games/competition one week (Thursday - Wednesday). **\*\***(See Waiver rule)
- ✓ For any failing grade, students must meet with teacher for academic support and turn in a signed academic support voucher OR risk becoming ineligible to participate in games/competition one week (Thursday - Wednesday).

- ❖ Waiver Rule – Students may be eligible failing 2 subjects for period of 2 weeks, to give the opportunity for the student to raise their grade in one of the subjects. This option can only be given once per semester

**P.P.O. = Practice Player Only**

A student who **DOES NOT MEET**, IHSA requirement passing 5 classes or has an 1.49 unweighted GPA or lower, can still participate in sports but as a **practice-player-only**. The following provisions must be met:

- ✓ Director of Athletics & Activities and Head Coach/Sponsor must approve that student(s) may participate as a **practice-player-only**
- ✓ Student, as determined by teacher must **meet for academic support sessions weekly** for any class with a failing grade, and turn-in academic vouchers to head coach/sponsor and/or athletics & activities department.
- ✓ Student is **not eligible** to participate in any games/competitions – may travel with team, but **cannot dress** in uniform (*great opportunity to be a team manager, stats keeper, etc.*).
- ✓ Parents/Guardians must approve of student participating as practice-player-only
- ✓ Upon Marking Period (Semester) student may earn the privilege to participate/compete



**Extracurricular Academic Support Voucher**



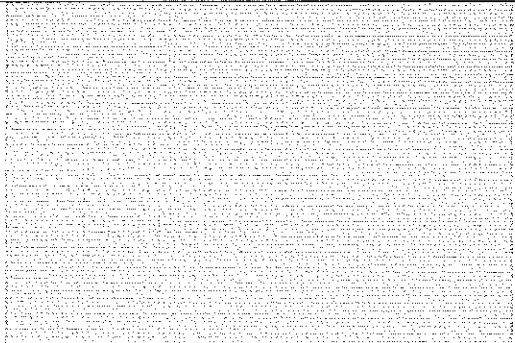
**DUE DATE:** Thu (8/28) by 3:30 p.m. or student risk being ineligible for Thursday Night/weekend competition and following week...

***“Student/Athlete means that the Student comes first”***

Week Day	Missing or Assigned Course work	Date	Class Hour	Teacher Signature	Teacher Comments
MON		9/1			
TUE		9/2			
WED		9/3			
THU		9/4			
FRI		9/5			

**\*\*STUDENTS – Must see each teacher with a failing grade and return to the athletic director’s office by 3:30 on Thursday.**

**LABS and EXTRA HELP SCHEDULE**



*Students First; Winning Will Happen...*

APPENDIX C

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***TIMELINE FOR IMPLEMENTATION***

August 2013 - January 2014	Discussion by Administrative team as regards to Academic Eligibility
Mid-January 2014	Administrative Team makes decision to look at making a change to current academic eligibility
Early February 2014	Athletic Director requests and collects Eligibility polices from other athletic directors
Mid-February 2014	Athletic Director present to administrative team a preliminary academic eligibility policy
February 26, 2014	At monthly coaches meeting, athletic director present the preliminary policy to the coaching staff for input and concerns.
March 12, 2014	New Academic Eligibility policy is presented to the Board of Education Co-Curricular Committee for approval.
April 16, 2014	New Academic Eligibility policy is presented to the Board of Education at the monthly general meeting.
April 2014 - June 2014	New Academic Eligibility policy is presented on the Seneca High School website for comments and questions
June 18, 2014	New Academic Eligibility policy is presented to the Board of Education at the monthly general meeting and is approved for implementation.
August 11, 2014 November 10, 2014 March 3, 2015	New Academic Eligibility policy is presented to the parent and student athletes at the fall, winter, and spring seasonal parent meetings.
August 18, 2015	Implementation of the new Academic Eligibility

## APPENDIX D

### Eligibility Q&A

1. What is the IHSA's eligibility requirement?

***According to the IHSA, students must be passing 25 academic hours (5 classes). If this requirement has not been met, the student is ineligible to participate in games/competition for the entire semester.***

2. Is the district eliminating the IHSA requirement?

***No, as a member of the IHSA, we must keep the minimum IHSA eligibility rules. Seneca High School will be adding to the IHSA eligibility requirements.***

3. Why does the district want to add to the IHSA eligibility requirement?

***Because we utilize block scheduling, SHS students are enrolled in eight courses each semester. According to the IHSA, our students can be failing three classes and still maintain their eligibility. We believe in raising expectations for our students.***

4. How will eligibility be determined?

***The new eligibility program is comprised of three-tiers: 1) Weekly Eligibility; 2) Grading Period Eligibility; and 3) Semester Eligibility. To maintain their eligibility, students must meet the requirements in each tier.***

5. What are the new weekly eligibility requirements?

***Essentially, students cannot be failing more than 1 subject AND must possess a cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 2.0 or better.***

6. What happens if a student has met the requirement for passing courses in a week, but has a GPA lower than 2.0?

***Students with a 1.5-1.99 GPA are eligible to participate in games/completions, but MUST ATTEND ACADEMIC SUPPORT SESSIONS AS DETERMINED by his/her teachers, coach/sponsor, and administrator. Failure to comply with this requirement will result in students being ineligible until the next grading period.***

7. What happens if a student is failing more than one course?

***Failing more than one subject as outlined on the Weekly Eligibility List (WEL) will result in ineligibility from games/competitions for one week (Thursday-Wednesday).***

8. Are there any exceptions to the new eligibility rules?

***Yes. Students failing two courses are eligible for a waiver. 9. How does the waiver work?***

***Students may continue to eligible for games/competition with two F's on the WEL if:***

***1) For each failing grade, students must meet with his/her classroom teacher for academic support;***

***2)The impacted student turns in a signed academic support voucher;***

***3)The student raises at least one of the failing grades to a passing grade within a period of two weeks.***

10. What is an academic support voucher?

***An academic support voucher is a school form required to be used by students who are failing a class, using a waiver, ineligible, or those with a GPA below 2.0. The voucher is provided to the students by the Activities Director (AD). Vouchers must be submitted to the AD before the end of the day on Friday.***

APPENDIX D

11. How many times may a student use a waiver?

***Students may use a waiver once per semester.***

12. Are there any other limitations to waiver use?

***Yes. Students may not use a waiver to begin a semester. That is, any student ineligible prior to beginning a new semester, may not use his/her waiver. After the two week waiver period, students must not be failing more than one subject to remain eligible.***

13. What is Grade Period Eligibility?

***Each semester is comprised of one grading period and two midpoint progress report periods. Each "mini" period represents 4.5 weeks in duration. If a student is failing more than two classes at the conclusion of any of the "mini" grading periods, the student will be ruled ineligible for the entire next "mini" grading period (4.5 weeks).***

14. So if a student was previously passing all courses but at a grading period earned more than one failing grade he/she is ineligible for 4.5 weeks?

***Yes.***

15. Can a student use his/her waiver for grade period ineligibility?

***Yes, on the condition that the waiver was not previously utilized. Students may not use waivers to overcome semester ineligibility.***

16. What is the GPA component of the eligibility policy?

***Students with a 1.5-1.99 GPA are eligible to participate in games/completions, but MUST ATTEND ACADEMIC SUPPORT SESSIONS AS DETERMINED by his/her teachers, coach/sponsor, and administrator. Failure to comply with this requirement will result in students being ineligible until the next grading period.***

17. Why does the policy have to be so complex?

***This policy seeks to provide: 1) high academic expectations for all Seneca High School students involved in co-curricular activities; 2) students with ownership over their grades; and 3) opportunities to maintain/regain eligibility after improving their academic performance. The district did not want to simply raise the eligibility requirements without supporting students. Consequently, a waiver process and the concept of a grading period were added to provide students with a second chance and a process to regain lost eligibility more quickly.***

18. What is semester ineligibility?

***Any student not failing more than 3 courses (IHSA standards) at the end of a semester is ineligible for the entire next semester. No waivers are granted in this case.***

19. When will this policy be implemented?

***This policy will be implemented at the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year. Specific benchmarks are as follows:***

- 1. The first weekly check for eligibility will be Week 1 of the Fall 2014 semester;***
  - 2. The first "mini" grading period will take place when Progress Reports for quarter 1 are due; and***
  - 3. The first Semester GPA check will be at the conclusion of the Fall 2014 Semester.***
- ALL students enter the 2014-15 school year under the 2013-14 eligibility rules until classes begin.***

APPENDIX D

20. Does this policy only impact student-athletes?

**No. The policy applies to all SHS students participating in co-curricular activities.**

**Scenarios**

A. Failing three courses at the end of second semester during the 2013-2014 (current) school year, a student wants to participate in a fall sport in 2014. Are they eligible?

**Yes. These changes are effective the first day of the 20-14-2015 school year. Therefore, students begin the year under the old rules.**

B. A student is failing two courses the first week of eligibility checks. Is the student eligible?

**The student is ineligible; however, he or she may use his or her waiver to regain eligibility. Additionally, the student must meet with his/her classroom teacher for academic support and the impacted student turns in a signed academic support voucher.**

**Students failing to fulfill the requirements to earn a waiver remain ineligible.**

C. As a result of the first weekly eligibility check, a student is failing 3 courses. What happens?

**The student is ineligible for the next week. A waiver cannot be obtained because the student has too many F's. For each failing grade, students must meet with his/her classroom teacher for academic support and the impacted student turns in a signed academic support voucher.**

D. As a result of a grading period eligibility check (4.5 weeks), a student, who had previously been passing all of his courses earns two failing grades. What happens?

**If the student has not yet used his waiver during the semester, he may use it and thus maintain his eligibility if he seeks academic support and completes the requisite academic support voucher.**

E. A student uses her voucher during in the fourth week of school. In late November the same student is listed on the Weekly Eligibility List as failing two courses. What happens?

**Since the student had previously used her waiver in the semester, she is ineligible for the week and must meet with her teachers for academic support and complete a teacher signed academic support voucher.**

F. A student earns two failing grades at the end of a semester, what happens?

**The student is ineligible until the next 4.5 week grading period. No waivers are granted in this case.**

G. During the First Semester a student uses his waiver to remain eligible. In March, the same student-athlete is again failing two classes. Is he eligible to use a waiver?

**Yes. A student may seek a waiver once per semester.**

## 2014-15 Dates:

Quarter 1 Progress Report Date: September 19, 2014

(Week 4 of Football)

End of Quarter 1: October 17, 2014

(Week 8 of Football, Week prior to Volleyball and Cross regional, after Golf Post season)

Quarter 2 Progress Report Date: November 21, 2014

(After week 1 of Girls Basketball Games, prior to Wrestling and Boys Basketball Games)

End of Quarter 2: Semester Finals...Christmas Break–December 19, 2014

Quarter 3 Progress Report Date: February 6, 2015

(Just prior to Winter Post-Season)

End of Quarter 3: March 6, 2015

(Coincides with the Beginning of Spring practices)

Quarter 4 Progress Report Date: April 16, 2015

(Middle of Spring Season...runs through the remainder of Spring Season\*\*)

End of Quarter 4: Semester Finals...Summer Break – May 28, 2015

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### *Conclusion*

After evaluating the Seneca High School student-athletes and their performance in the classroom, there was a need to increase the expectations of the student-athletes as it comes to academic eligibility. It had been observed that student-athletes that were capable of doing much more in the classroom were able to coast by with unacceptable performance in the classroom. If we are going to use the term student-athlete, it must be understood that the student come before athlete in that term. The need was there to increase that expectation and a new academic eligibility policy has been approved and will be implemented at Seneca High School in the fall of 2014. As the student-athletes had been allowed to follow the current IHSA academic eligibility policy, they will now be required to meet more stringent expectations that have been proposed by the athletic director and approved by the board of education for Seneca High School. Under IHSA policy, the student-athletes were allowed to fail up to 3 courses and still be eligible to participate in athletics, and now under new regulations, the student-athletes will not be allowed to fail more than 1 course to remain eligible to compete in athletics. This policy has the support of the board of education, the administrative team, the teaching staff, the coaching staff, the community, and the parents of Seneca High School students. The ultimate goal of this policy is not to remove more student-athletes from competing in athletics, but rather to increase the academic performance of the student-athletes at Seneca High School.