

Perceptions of Pay to Play Policies on High School Sports Participation: A Qualitative Study

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School sports participation is important

- Increased physical activity and fitness
- Improved mental well-being
- Positive youth development
- Reduced risk behavior



How are sports programs funded?

- General education budget
- Local property taxes
- Booster clubs/donations
- Sponsorship



King, B. 2010. High school sports running on empty. Sports Business journal. Aug 10. Accessed Oct 21 at <http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2010/08/20100802/SBJ-In-Depth/High-School-Sports-Running-On-Empty.aspx>

Pay to Play?

- Charging fees for sports participation (or other extra curricular activities) is one way to accommodate budget shortfalls
- Fees are seen as an alternative to eliminating some or all sports
- 18 states have laws allowing schools to charge
- California has a law that prohibits charging fees
- 2014 survey estimated average fee per athlete was \$126
- May result in decreased participation, especially for low-income students

Study Aims

- The purpose of this study was to conduct Key Informant Interviews with a sample State, District, and School Athletic Directors to gain insight into sports fee implementation and perception.
- Use information to develop a national quantitative survey



Methods

- Used purposive and snowball sampling
- Chose MI and OH for state level due to current press or legislative action
- Sent email invitations to 150 athletic directors and planned telephone interviews with all who agreed to participate
- Developed an interview guide based on literature search and legislative search
- Interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed
- Analyzed using NVIVO v11 using constant comparative coding
- Themes summarized and aggregated

Who were the key informants?

- 2 state high school athletic association representatives (OH, MI)
- 10 district or high school level athletic directors (IL, OH, MO, MN, NJ, WI, WA)
- Averaged 13 years of experience in high school athletics (range 4-20 years)
- All men
- All were teachers, coaches, or administrators
- All had past high school or collegiate sports experience

First lesson learned....

- Don't call it Pay to Play!

“We don't like to call it pay to play, because for many people, the word play connotation means they're going to get in every game.”



Main Themes: Reason for policies

- State budget cuts in education funding
- Increasing costs of sports programs
- Unsuccessful levy passage or loss of tax revenue

“if they (levy) don’t pass then the district has to make decisions about, okay, do you pay the math teacher or do you not have tennis.”

Main Theme: Fee Structure

- Varies tremendously

“We had a school district that did it by sport. For volleyball it was like \$950 and tennis was \$1000, because they did it by sport. There was another district right next door to them that does it too. It’s \$25 a kid per season.”

Main Theme: Fee Structure

- Could be per sport, athlete, season
- Some had multiple sport or family caps



Main Theme: Waivers

- Most districts had waivers or scholarships for students who might not be able to pay fee
- Groups eligible varied but all included students qualifying for free or reduced lunch prices
- Some had partial fee waivers

“And if they don’t qualify for that (FRL), but are still struggling to make the payment, then we go and they are referred to the principal and he goes case by case. Many times we’ll do a payment plan or waive it entirely, it all depends on the situation.”

Main Theme: Waivers

- Parents or students might be embarrassed asking for waivers
- Those struggling financially, but not qualifying for waiver populations are affected

Main Themes: Administration

- How the fees are collected and waivers managed is different across districts
- For some it seems like a complicated and time-consuming process

“For some reason I think they felt I was going to be ... it was going to be an easy thing. Well you assign the fee, people pay the fee, you move on. It's not that easy”

Main Themes: Consequences

- Some thought the fees were not influencing overall participation
- The waivers seemed to be working to keep students unable to afford to play in their sports
- Some reported that it could be a burden on parents, but in wealthier districts, students are already playing expensive club sports

Main Themes: Consequences

- Some said that if fees were to increase, it would impact participation
- Mentioned that if no waivers, participation would decrease
- One reported that fees can keep athletes from trying different sports
- Fees were more likely to impact less popular sports or JV sports

Main Themes: Opposition

- Most reported more acceptance of the fees than opposition
- Some parents oppose the fees
- One stated that some people oppose the fees because they are already paying taxes for public schools
- *“The ones that would be opposed to that, that would be showing up at a board meeting about that, would predominantly be parents because parents are going to go, wait a second, we never had to do this before. Why are we doing it now?”*

Main Themes: Perception of Policy

- Necessary in times of reduced budget
- Some strongly disagreed with the policy
- Were either proud of the low amount or embarrassed by how much their district charges
- Sometimes parents will do anything to keep kids in sports for scholarship potential

Summary

- Seems to be a growing trend
- Policies vary tremendously
- All had some sort of waiver of fees
- More acceptance than opposition

Next Steps

- Implement a national survey of athletic directors (12/2017)
- Compare and contrast district characteristics, policy, and perception
- Disseminate to multiple audiences

Thank You!
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