

PAY-TO-PLAY

A MIXED-METHOD STUDY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SPORTS PARTICIPATION FEE POLICIES IN THE U.S.

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Introduction

What are sports participation fees?

Sports participation fees refer to the collection of fees from students in order to participate in extracurricular activities at school. Policies that implement these practices are commonly known as “pay-to-play” policies.

Why do sports participation fees matter?

- Participation in high school athletics is associated with improved physical, psychological, and social health for those students.
- When budgets get cut, schools and school districts often prioritize academics over “extraneous activities.” As a voluntary activity, sports participation is often viewed as complementary to education.
- Shifting the burden of costs from the school or school district to the family may deter participation, in particular for the children of low-income families.
- As a result of participation fees, parents may be forced to choose which sports to pay for if multiple sports are played, or choose between children if affordability of fees is an issue.

Study Purpose

1. Describe the national landscape of laws governing sport participation fees.
2. Describe implementation of sports participation fees and the effect on student participation in school athletics, particularly among disadvantaged populations.

Methods

Legislative review

The U.S. legislative review summarized key components of sports participation fees.

- Codified statutes and administrative regulations were compiled for all 50 states and the District of Columbia using Boolean keyword searches.
- Laws were included if in effect as of December 31, 2016.
- Relevant laws were evaluated to identify pay-to-play policies, as well as any related provisions designed to offset the financial burden on families.

Key Informant Interviews

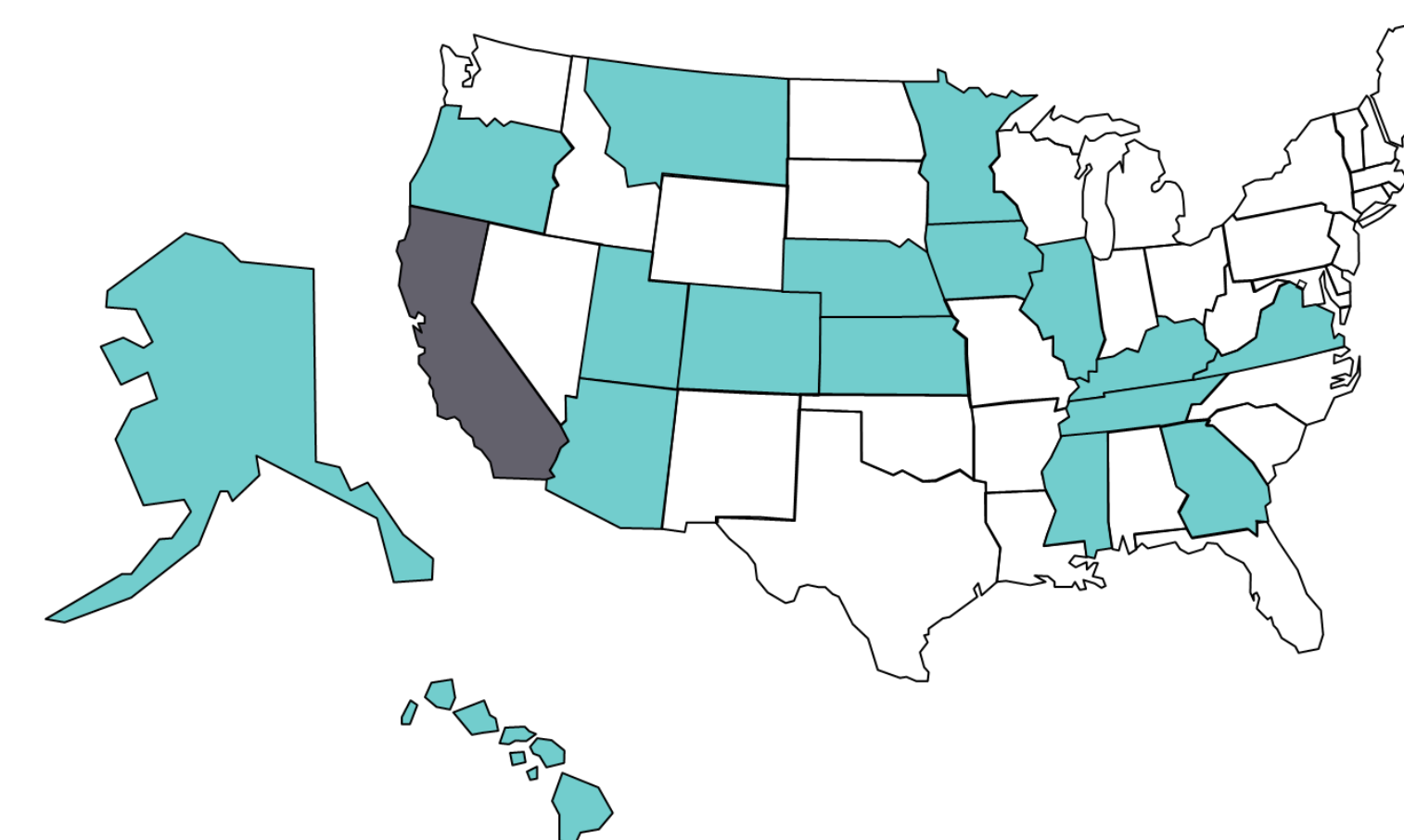
- Interviews were conducted via telephone.
- Participants included 12 athletic directors across 12 states.
- Participants were selected based on geographic and demographic diversity, and variance in related state legislation.
- Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded to identify themes.
- The interview data helped inform a quantitative survey of a nationally representative sample of athletic directors (currently ongoing).

Results

Legislative Review

- Just like many other topics related to education, state laws vary tremendously.
- Many states have laws that recommend or require waivers for those who can't pay (these groups are mainly those that qualify for FRL prices, but other categories are also included in some states).
- States are also introducing legislation to prohibit fees for sports.
- More research is needed to determine the impact of these laws at the district and school level.

Sports Participation Fee Laws as of December 31, 2016



- No sport participation fee law (n=33)
- Sports participation fees allowed (n=17)
- Sports participation fees banned (n=1)

Key Informant Interviews

Perceptions of these policies varied widely across the athletic directors.

- Several participants stated they do not use “pay-to-play,” because for many people, that means the student will get to play in every game. They prefer “sports participation fees.”
- Fee structures varied by sport, family size, and multiple sports played.
- Reasons for the fees included cuts to state education budget; rising costs of running sports programs and decreased tax revenue within district.
- All participants described the existence of waivers for students eligible for free and reduced lunch.
- The effect of fees on sports participation was wide-ranging and reflected the large variance in the amount of fees across districts.
- Participants were divided on their acceptance of the fees.
- Level of opposition and support from the school community for these policies varied.

“We had a school district that [charged fees] 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.”

-Athletic Director

Conclusions

Variation in sports participation policies across states, and even by school district, make it difficult to summarize the policies' effect on students. However, even with mitigation strategies in place (waivers), the impact on disadvantaged groups is dependent on a variety of factors. The research team is conducting a national survey of Athletic Director's perspectives on sports participation policies in the winter of 2018 to better understand these factors.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Findings on how sports participation fee policies affect students' abilities to participate in sports can inform policymakers and school districts as they make tough decisions about school budgets.

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