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Perspectives on High School "Pay to Play" Sports Fee Policies: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background: Participation in high school athletics is associated with many physical and psychosocial benefits. School budget cuts and increased program costs have resulted in policies requiring student athletes to pay fees for sports participation. The purpose of this study was to explore the implementation and perception of these policies among state and district key informants.

Methods: We conducted an Internet search to compile a list of state and district athletic directors for study recruitment to participate in qualitative interviews. Twelve key informants were interviewed via telephone, digitally audio-recorded, and the conversations transcribed verbatim. Two team members coded transcripts and themes were identified and summarized.

Results: The main reasons for implementing fee policies were increasing program costs, revenue loss or decreased school budget, and unsuccessful levy passage. The policies varied in fee structure, and were reported by sport, by athlete, by year, or by family. Participants discussed fee waivers as a strategy to assist athletes unable to pay the sports participation fees. Waivers were most likely linked with federal poverty qualifications.

Conclusion: The results from these interviews provided insight into sports participation policies in US high schools. More information is needed to explore the consequences of these policies on high school sports participation as well as longer-term outcomes.

Keywords

policy; sports; school; athletics

Introduction

Formal high school sports programs have a long history that dates back to the late 1890's and have evolved over the past century into an integral part of the school environment (1). Currently, about 80% of U.S. public high schools offer at least one sports program (2, 3). According to the 2016 report by the National Federation of State High School Athletics, 7.9

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Conflict of Interest

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million high school students (about 15% of high school students) in the United States participated in sports in the 2016–17 academic year (2).

Sports participation is associated with many benefits for high school students. Sports provide an opportunity for students to be physically active at an age when physical activity levels tend to decrease (4, 5). Youth sports have been estimated to contribute 23–60% of daily physical activity (6, 7). In a recent systematic review, Eime and colleagues (2013) described a positive correlation between sports participation and psychosocial benefits such as higher self-esteem, better social skills, fewer depressive symptoms, and higher confidence (8). Also, given the relationship between physical activity and cognitive function, sports participation may bolster academic performance and academic achievement (9, 10).

There are many benefits of sports participation that may extend beyond high school too. Evidence is emerging on participation in high school sports as a predictor of being a physically active adult and subsequently, maintaining better physical and mental health in older adulthood (11, 12). In addition to physical health, financial correlates of former high school athletes have been investigated. One study showed that former high school athletes earned higher wages and larger fringe benefits than students who did not participate in sports (13). Other research identified skills (e.g. leadership) that are cultivated in high school sports participation which may increase chances for career success (14).

Opportunities for sports participation in high school seem particularly important for girls. For example, studies showed that female sports participation in high school had a positive association with enrollment in advanced placement classes (15) and math achievement (16). A longitudinal study following over 5000 high school-age girls found that participation in high school sports increased the odds of finishing college (17). There is emerging evidence on the reduction of risk behavior for female high school athletes such as lower illicit drug use and reduced risk of teen pregnancy (18). In spite of these benefits, fewer girls than boys participate in high school sports. According to the National Federation of High School Sports, over 4.5 million boys were high school athletes in 2016 compared with 3.3 million girls (2). A report on gender and high school sports participation found that girls are provided proportionally fewer athletic participation opportunities than boys (19) and these opportunities may be at risk due to shrinking school athletic budgets.

In spite of the growing body of evidence citing the short- and long-term benefits of participating in school sports, many programs are being impacted by education budget cuts. Increased emphasis on meeting academic performance standards has made extracurricular activities a low priority, and often the first to be eliminated or reduced in tough economic times (20). School districts modified their sports programs in many ways to make up for decreasing budgets. Some eliminated programs all together, but many reduced the number of sports they offer, eliminated freshman or JV programs, or reduced coaching and administrative costs (21). A growing trend in school sports funding is to shift part of the program cost to student athletes and their families. This practice of charging sports participation fees is commonly called “pay to play” (22, 23).

The way in which the decision is made to charge fees varies. Seventeen states have laws that outline the practice of charging fees for extracurricular activities in public schools (Citation Blinded). Many of the state laws also outline provisions for waivers for low-income students who might not be able to afford the fees. California prohibits charging fees as a result of a 1984 lawsuit identifying public schools as funded by taxes, and therefore cannot charge fees for programs related to schools (24). Most often, the decision to charge fees is a local one, guided and set by district school boards (22).

The growing trend of charging high school participation fees has resulted in opposition from parents, athletic administrators, and school sports advocates (22, 23). Consequently, there has been legislative interest in this topic. Michigan and New Jersey introduced bills to limit or prohibit sports participation fees, but these bills were not enacted as of the end of the 2017 legislative session. In fact, neither of the bills progressed beyond their first committee (See H 5404, 98th Leg 1st Session MI 2015 and AB 1771, 217th Leg 1st Session NJ 2016). To explore this topic further, the purpose of this study was to gain insight from high school athletic directors through key informant interviews about sports participation fee policy implementation in a sample of U.S. school districts. Information from these interviews will be used to develop a quantitative survey, which will be distributed to a large, nationally representative sample of district representatives.

Methods

Interview Guide Development

To develop the most relevant questions for the key informant interviews, state legislation related to sports participation fees was collected and summarized. The research team also reviewed the literature and popular press for information about this topic. Language and themes from this review were used to develop a list of potential questions was outlined and an interview guide drafted. The guide was developed to assess aspects of district or school policies including history, policy implementation, provisions for fee waivers, and general perception of sports participation fee policies. This project was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Washington University in St. Louis (#201702072). The guide was pilot tested with a local athletic director, which resulted in minor changes in wording, but no substantive thematic revisions.

Sample

Exploration of this topic warranted input from state, district, and school representatives. The research team compiled a convenience sample of high school or school district athletic directors whose school has implemented a sports participation fee policy. States that were highlighted in recent press related to opposition of sports participation fee policies (OH and MI) were targeted, and we invited administration from state level high school sports agencies in these states to participate. California was not included in our sample because it is the only state where legislation prohibits charging fees for extracurricular activities in public schools. A convenience sample of 150 district or school athletic directors and two state-level directors of state high school sports associations were sent email invitations to participate in the interviews.

Data collection

Sixteen people responded to our participation request and 12 were interviewed. Four were not interviewed because their school or district did not have a policy on sports participation fee and could not provide the key information needed for study. Members of the research team (AE, CV, NS) interviewed the participants by telephone, at times/days that were convenient to their schedule. The interviews lasted between 17–35 minutes, were digitally audio recorded and professionally transcribed. Interviewer notes supplemented the transcripts.

Analysis

A codebook was developed to facilitate analysis of the transcripts. Three members of the research team (AE, CV, NS) read over the same four transcripts and came up with a draft list of code categories. They then had a discussion of these codes and refined the list. Using this new list, all three team members coded one transcript in detail to ensure consistent interpretation of the coding schemes. The transcripts and codebook were uploaded into NVIVO v11, a qualitative analysis software program. Two team members coded each transcript using constant comparative coding methodology (25), and a pursuant discussion on the coded documents rectified any discordance. Once all transcripts were coded and discussed, text within each code was grouped and thematically summarized. Direct quotes were used to represent the main themes that emerged.

Results

Of those interviewed, two were administrators at the state high school athletics level, six at the district level, and four were athletic directors representing single high schools. The majority of schools and districts (n=8) were in urban/metropolitan areas. Six of the key informants had over 10 years of experience as athletic director and four had between 2–9 years of experience. All of the key informants interviewed also reported serving in current or past coaching roles and were high school or collegiate athletes themselves.

The first important finding was that while “Pay to Play” was used in the interview questions about these practices and policies, athletic director feedback indicated that this is not the way it is described in practice. They consistently used the term *sports participation fees* or *pay to participate* because “Pay to Play” implies that payment of fees guarantees playing time.

““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 Reasons for Sports Participation Policies

Reasons for implementing fee policies were framed in two main categories: declining resources and increased costs. Every participant mentioned that state education budget cuts negatively affected the sports programs in schools. They indicated that these cuts resulted in districts having to accommodate budget shortfalls, and that passing some of the financial burden onto students and parents was one way to do this.

“So as our budgets get tighter and tighter every year, they wanted to know of a way to keep the activities and the athletics to generate some funds so that we didn’t have to eliminate programs. So the participation fee came in.”

Also related to declining resources was revenue loss. They described this loss in terms of decreased tax revenue within districts due to economic downturns (i.e. corporations closing or moving out of district). Some cited revenue loss from unsuccessful levy passage. Seven of the key informants mentioned that the districts were reluctant to implement fees, but used fee policies at a last resort instead of cutting programs all together.

“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.”

The second main reason for implementing a sports participation fee policy was the rising costs of administering sports programs. Participants cited increasing equipment costs, field maintenance, coaches’ salaries, and association fees as reasons for needing additional funds for sports programs. One athletic director mentioned that because the costs increased yet their budgets remained constant or decreased, they needed to charge fees to cover the deficit. It was noted that the fees did cover all of the costs of running a sports program.

Fee Structure

The key informants described a wide variety of fee structures. First, the amount of the fees charged were not consistent among those interviewed. For some, the fee structure was a simple calculation of the athletic budget divided by the number of athletes that are involved in the athletic program. Others used more detailed calculation of specific costs associated with each sport. For two of the districts represented, the fees were arbitrarily set by the school board, trying to balance covering costs and not allowing the fees to be too high to be supported by parents. Three athletic directors who were interviewed noted that the fee has not changed in several years, and four mentioned that the fees have increased.

Administration of athletic budgets varies across districts. The money from the sports participation fees was reported to end up in different financial accounts. For some, all of the fee revenue was put into the athletics budget, for others, the majority of the money went into a general district account which fund coaches’ salaries and athletic team transportation. The proportion of the fees that came back to the athletics department budget were mentioned as being used for equipment and facilities.

Prior to implementing policies, some participants mentioned that they looked to neighboring districts or other places within their state to assess model policies and get information on the implementation process.

“We actually surveyed other school districts and gathered some snapshots of other schools. And then made a decision on the price and tried to see a reasonable price. So we weren’t the highest, we weren’t the lowest, we were right there in the median.”

It was noted that some sports are more expensive to operate than others, and this resulted in fee variance. Hockey was mentioned as an expensive sport due to ice rental fees, but sports

like cross-country running have lower operating costs and subsequently, lower fees. Parameters of sports participation fees included year, individual athlete, or season. Some of the athletic directors interviewed also reported that there were caps for the policies by athlete or by family, while others said their policies were just flat fees for all.

“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.”

Waivers

All school or district administrators interviewed said that they had some type of waivers or scholarships for students who might not be able to pay the fee. Waiver eligibility was based on students qualifying for free or reduced lunch (FRL) prices, but some programs broadened eligibility to include other factors such as temporary financial hardship or parental military service. Some also reported having partial fee waivers or sliding scale fees. Eight participants reported being flexible in fee payment and reviewed those who struggle with the fee on a case-by-case basis.

“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.”

Several of the interviewees mentioned that the stigma attached to asking for a waiver might be a barrier to playing sports, and that students (or parents) may not want the school personnel to know about financial hardship. Two of the athletic directors interviewed mentioned that they did not know which athletes qualified for waivers, how many waivers are requested, or the number granted each year due to the Federal Right to Privacy Act related to eligibility for free or reduced lunch prices.

Administration of the policy

Fees administration and waivers were managed differently across districts. While most agreed that charging fees is one way to maintain sports programs in lieu of budget cuts, they also indicated that there are administrative complexities of managing the fee collection. Sometimes the administrative responsibilities fell to the athletic director and this was not well received. Four of the athletic directors complained that they feel like “*debt collectors*” and “*enforcers*” of the policy. They mentioned that they spend a significant amount of time each season reaching out to students or parents who haven’t paid, checking in with coaches, and comparing rosters against fee payment. They described the process as a “*nuisance*,” “*time-consuming*,” and “*labor intensive*,” but gave no indication or suggestions about who would be better suited to manage the fee collection.

“For some reason I think they felt it 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”

Consequences of Sports Participation Fee Policy

Many of the athletic directors felt as if the fee policies were not affecting overall sports participation in their own districts and the number of athletes (e.g. tracked by rosters) have not changed significantly since the sports participation fee was implemented. However, ten respondents mentioned that they have heard anecdotally how fees are causing decreased participation in other districts with higher fees. Several mentioned that a fee increase in their own district would be the tipping point and there would be resultant negative consequences in sports participation. Three interviewees thought that fees might keep students from playing multiple sports or trying new sports.

“It may keep kids from coming out for multiple sports. And we have sort of the non-cut sports where in the fall say you wanted to come out for cross-country, then in the spring maybe you want to come out for track, but you’re not a die-hard athlete, it may keep them from doing that.”

Four of the athletic directors interviewed mentioned that without waiver programs, sports participation would decrease. One indicated that athletes who do not qualify for free or reduced lunch prices, but still experienced financial challenges might be the ones most affected by the fees.

“Well I’m sure the ones that ... the ones that are from tougher financial situations, of course, are going to be in a harder spot, especially the ones that maybe don’t qualify for free and reduced lunch, but still are ... they’re having to count their pennies. I’m sure those are the ones who are affected most if they have to pay... the group that’s maybe not financially hurting enough where they get assistance, but they’re just above that line, I’m sure that probably is not easy for them.”

Opposition

Participants cited parents as the group most often opposing the fee policy. They mentioned that parents were likely to bring up this issue at school board meetings, and that they are vocal about the importance of their children participating in high school sports. Districts that go from no fee to implementing a fee policy have a difficult time communicating justification of charging the fees to parents of athletes. Others mentioned that their state high school athletic associations oppose sports participation fees, especially with the local control of school districts and little guidance in developing fee structures or tracking the consequences of the fees charged.

“The ones that would be opposed to 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?” And are you sure you need those three tutors, because they’re not as important as the coach of the sport that my kid’s participating in.”

General perception of sports participation fee policy

While the athletic directors all stated the importance of high school sports programs, those interviewed were split in their level of acceptance of sports participation fee policies. Some strongly disagreed with having the policy in place and felt as if it was not only a nuisance to

administer, but also that there should be other ways to keep sports programs funded. Corporate sponsorship and fundraising were two suggestions. Some accepted it as an unfortunate reality in the times of funding cuts and that it was a better option than eliminating sports programs.

“I became a high school athletic director to teach kids life lessons through athletic participation, and I personally don’t believe in charging students for participation fees. I think the athletic department is an extension of the classroom. We’re just teaching other skills versus traditional classroom skills. And I’m vehemently opposed to participation fees, but it seems to be the way of the world these days in the U.S., that more and more districts are charging fees for athletic participation.”

One participant from a higher poverty district explained that sports programs are essential for keeping at-risk students out of trouble and involvement positively impacts school attendance. Thus, this participant was in support of charging fees (as long as they had a waiver in place) in order to keep programs from being cut because sports involvement keeps these students in school. The athletic directors in wealthier school districts mentioned that the fees of community club sports teams were much higher than the high school fees, and this made these policies more acceptable to parents who are used to high-price athletics.

“And if they’re involved in any kind of club or travel team outside of the school, the fee is generally a lot more. So I think part of them, they understand the fee, and some of them are probably glad that it is as low as it is compared to maybe some of the other things their children are involved in.”

Discussion

Findings from this qualitative study shed light on the varied ways sports participation fees have been developed and implemented, as well as their perception of impact. Several key findings warrant further discussion. First, the athletic directors in our sample saw sports fee policies as a growing trend. As sports budgets decreased along with increased costs, more schools will likely implement fee policies. Their concern is supported by national and state data. In 2006, the School Health Policies and Practices Study (SHPPS) found that 33% of high schools in their national sample charged fees for participation in interscholastic sports, and 86% of those waived the fees for those unable to pay (26, 27). In 2014, SHPPS data indicated that 38% of high schools charge fees and the percentage of schools with waivers decreased to 80% (28). Results from the Michigan High School Athletic Association Survey for 2016–17 show that 49.7% of high schools charge a sports participation fee (29) up from 22.6% in 2003 (30). The number of high school athletes required to pay a fee for sports participation increased and the gap in assistance for low-income athletes has widened. This is concerning because a disparity in sports participation by income already exists. According to survey results from a 2015 Pew Research Center, adolescent sports participation as reported by parents with a household income of <30K\$ was 25% less than for parents with a household income of >75K\$ (59% versus 84%, respectively) (31). The fee policies may also decrease the opportunities for girls to participate in sports, thus widening the already existing gap between male and female athletics (19). Respondents in our study perceived fee policies as not impacting participation, but indicated that the waivers and low fee amounts

kept athlete participation steady. If current trends continue, increased fees and will change and may result in decreased sports participation, particularly for low-income athletes. Parents can play an important role in advocating for better policies or alternative funding mechanisms, particularly to keep fees from increasing. Effective advocacy strategies and best practices for influencing school policy decisions are needed.

Waivers seem to be an important factor in helping students avoid sports fees, but only for those meeting the waiver qualifications. The specification for the waivers (most likely those qualifying for free and reduced lunch prices) may impact a group of student athletes just above the federal poverty line. If students do not qualify for federal assistance, they may not be eligible for fee waivers either, despite economic hardship. Additionally, some students report a stigma related to having government assistance with food(32), and this may be similar to identifying them as “in need” of help paying sports fees. This aspect of the topic warrants further study.

Key informants reported perceptions on acceptance of these policies. Acceptance was mainly due to the alternative of reducing or eliminating sports programs. Parents may be willing to pay the fees as a way of keeping their children involved in sports. Research shows that parental support positively impacts sustained organized sports involvement for adolescence (33, 34). Another factor of acceptance may be that parents have become accustomed to paying fees for extracurricular activities. Participants in our study mentioned how the fees of club sports or elite leagues are usually very high, thus making school fees seem relatively low in comparison. While not all high school athletes play club sports, the cost of participation is high. A national survey of parents of adolescents who play on a “highly competitive or elite team run by a non-school organization” reported spending an average of \$100 to \$500 per month per child (27).

Limitations

There are limitations of this study that should be noted. First lack of generalizability is inherent with qualitative research. The comments from this convenience sample and low response rate may not be representative of all athletic directors. However, the purpose of these interviews was to inform the development of a national survey and insights from this group provided a valuable contribution to the next phase of study. Second, we only spoke to one person per district. They were all knowledgeable about their sports participation fee policies, but other athletic administrators from the same district may have expressed different views. Third, results from the state-level directors were combined with the results from school and district athletic directors, which may not fully represent a local perspective. Despite the limitations, this study is a substantive contribution to the topic of high school sports participation fees. A better understanding of school budgets and fees in general is needed to fully explore this topic and should be considered for future research on sports participation fee policies. Additionally, consistent monitoring of sports participation and demographics of athletes could identify the impact of these policies.

Conclusion

The vast majority of high schools in the United States have sports programs and student athletes can benefit from participating in school sports. The cost of these programs is increasing and there is a growing trend to charge fees to parents and student athletes. Athletic directors in our study reported varied fee structure, implementation, and overall perception of these policies. Findings will inform the development of a national survey and future research to identify outcomes of sports participation fees.

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