

Pay No More to Play: School Board Decision Making and the Elimination of Sport Participation Fees

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Organizational theory/culture **Friday, May 31, 2013** **20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)
(Room 416)**

Abstract 2013-148 **1:40 PM**

The Problem and Objectives of this Research

Sport participation fees, often called “pay-to-play” policies, are becoming increasingly common in public schools and districts around the United States. In 2004, a USA Today survey of high school sports associations found that school districts in 34 states were charging students to play sports (Brady & Glier, 2004). In Kansas, pay-to-play districts increased from 29 to 55 from 2001 to 2004, or to 18 percent of the state’s school districts. And in Michigan, slightly over 50 percent of high schools indicated they charged user fees in 2011, compared with just under 35% in 2004 and only 10% in 1994 (MHSAA, 2012). Typically, fees range from 75 to 100 dollars; however, they can be much higher. This is a worrisome trend given that pay-to-play fees can be economically prohibitive for lower income families (Ewing, 1995; MHSAA, 2010).

Interestingly, despite the trend in pay-to-play, some districts have eliminated such policies, years after adoption. The questions are: why and how? With this study, we explore the decision-making process surrounding the reversal of sport participation fees by public school districts. Ultimately, this research aims to generate findings that improve our understanding of school board and school district decision-making, particularly around sport and physical activity offerings and education. This research has implications for school sport participation, including equal opportunities, which is important given that participation in school sports has been linked to a number of educational, occupational, and physical benefits (Marsh & Kleitman, 2003; Eccles, Barber, & Stone, 2003).

Theoretical Foundation

The fact that some school districts have decided to eliminate pay-to-play policies after they have been in place for years is surprising for a number of reasons. In addition to normative forces alluded to above, school districts are financially strapped and coping with continuous budget cuts. Pay-to-play can bring in needed revenue. Also, organizations experience inertia – once they adopt a course of action, they are likely to continue along that path (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Finally, it takes organizational resources to make decisions – school districts spend time and energy to make a case and mobilize support for a reversal in pay-to-play policies. All of these factors together, lead us to wonder: Why do some school districts get rid of pay to play? And how are these decisions made?

We investigate these questions inductively, but within the theoretical framework of institutional theory. In particular, we start from the idea that institutional environments often pose constraints on organizations and lead to conformity in practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983[1991]). These environments provide general rules for organizing, and corresponding meanings, values, and behaviors that are seen as proper, rational and necessary (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Barley & Tolbert, 1997). In the context of school districts, the institutional environment seems to be supporting pay-to-play fees, as they have steadily increased across and within school districts over the last 10 to 15 years. It is interesting, then, that some schools that had previously followed the normative trends are now reversing their policies. Why and how are some schools able to go against the norms of the field? In particular, what is the decision-making process causing some districts to deviate from pay-to-play trends? This line of questioning is consistent with more recent foci of institutional approaches to organizations that look at change and heterogeneity in institutional environments, rather than persistence and homogeneity (e.g., Dacin, Goodstein & Scott, 2002; Greenwood, et al., 2011).

To answer these questions, we investigate the motives and tactics of key players and stakeholders involved in the school district decision-making process, including school board members, school district administrators, athletic boosters, parents, and coaches. Drawing on previous work, we will pay particular attention to the dynamics and

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tactics of agenda management and issue-selling. Formal and informal agendas play a central role in directing attention, effort and resources in public and private organizations (Baumgartner and Jones 1991; Kingdon 1995[1984]; Ocasio 1997). An issue's prominence on the agenda may shift over time, leading it to attract more or less effort and resources (Dutton 1988; Hoffman and Ocasio 2001). Agendas are often influenced by certain members. In particular, individual concerns over an issue can motivate the emergence of issue entrepreneurs or champions of particular issues. These issue champions engage in agenda work that involves the use of tactics, such as framing and labeling issues, bargaining, developing coalitions, and aligning issues with organizational values (Dutton et al., 2001; Bansal, 2003). Through these tactics and processes, individuals can drive agenda change and decision-making by directing attention to issues. We examine who the champions of eliminating pay-to-play are and why; as well as what tactics they use to influence the agenda and ultimate decision-making of the school board. Thus, this study contributes to the literature on organizational decision-making within the context of institutional forces.

Method

Since our aim is to understand the decision-making processes around pay-to-play, we are conducting an in-depth, inductive case study of a public school district in Southeast Michigan that has recently reversed its pay-to-play policy. This school district first adopted pay to play in June 2010 and reversed its decision in August 2012. The town is a majority white (97%) community with a population of 4,398, according to the 2000 Census. The median family income is \$45,787; and the major employers are the hospital, milling company, and car company. We identified and interviewed an individual who was involved as an administrator in the original pay-to-play decision. This person agreed to serve as a key informant and will provide us access to others involved in the decision making process.

We will perform qualitative analyses of the school board decision making and surrounding forces, including the effect of various stakeholders. Sources will include interviews, observations, and archival data in the form of meeting minutes. We will conduct systematic interviews with members of the school board (7) and school district administrators (14) that amount to 21 prospective core interviewees. We will also conduct approximately 10 other interviews with athletic boosters, coaches and parents. The interviews will be relatively semi-structured. We expect that they will last from 30 minutes to 1 hour. We will tape record the interviews for further analysis and review. These interviews will help us understand individual stakeholders' motivations, interests, tactics, and roles in the decision-making; as well as the decision-making process as a whole.

Our observations will be of school board and administrators' meetings, as well as public community forums. We hope to observe between 5-10 meetings to gain a better understanding of the school district and board dynamics, including the key players, interests, and processes and procedures. We will also collect archival sources, including agendas, planning documents, and policy documents to better understanding of former and current pay-to-play policies and where pay-to-play falls within other school district concerns.

The qualitative data gathered from these interviews will be coded and analyzed systematically using qualitative analytic techniques (Feldman 1995). The analytic approach we will use is iteration between empirical data and theoretical constructs, or analytic abduction (Peirce, 1955). After completing this first study, we will identify a second school district that tried, but was unsuccessful, at eliminating pay-to-play to serve as comparative case.

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