Who Gets Shut Out?: Trends in Pay to Play in Interscholastic Sports - Tracking the Diffusion of a Strategic Practice

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Problem Statement
The benefits of high school sport participation have been thoroughly documented. There have been significant links between health, wellbeing, and high school sport (Sabo & Veliz, 2011). Besides being good for overall health, sport participation has also been shown to be beneficial on numerous academic achievement measures from better attendance records, to higher GPA, and educational aspirations (Fox et al., 2010; Marsh, 2003; Sabo & Veliz, 2011). For all of these reasons and numerous others, interscholastic sport has been a vital aspect of secondary education. However, decreases in federal, state, and local funding to schools are threatening the existence of interscholastic sport. In order to adapt, school districts have begun implementing ‘pay-to-play’ as a way to make up for revenue shortfalls by charging fees for participation in interscholastic sport. A survey conducted in 2004, found that 34 states’ high school sports associations had school districts that were charging students to play sports for their school teams (Brady & Glier, 2004). Since that time, the growth in this practice has become entrenched throughout the country (Clark, Singer, Butchart, Kauffman & Davis, 2012). The implications of this trend in increasing fees are substantial. Charging for previously free services can be economically prohibitive to lower income families (Clark et al., 2012; Ewing, 1995), and appears to have led to gender disparities in participation rates (Heinze, Heinze, Davis, Butchart, Singer & Clark, In Press). There has been little empirical focus on the administrative and managerial rationale and strategies regarding pay-to-play in the academic literature. The adoption of these practices as a remedy to resource shortfalls has been taken for granted as the most effective approach. Furthermore, there continue to remain gaps in our understanding of the scope and scale of these practices in U.S. interscholastic sport, and the trends regarding school and district level adoption. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which pay to play implemented in one state to uncover the entrenchment of this practice and explore patterns in school and district offerings.

Literature/Theoretical Framing
This study explores the adoption of pay-to-play as a strategic practice by which schools and school districts adapt to environmental resource constraints. Some scholars have differentiated potential administrative adaptations as either ‘fads’ or ‘entrenched’ managerial practices (Zeitz, Mittal, & McAulay, 1999). A fad is defined as an adopted practice that has not yet become entrenched or deep-rooted within an organization. ‘Entrenchment’ means that an adopted practice will resist change, is implemented widely, has well established policy support, and thus becomes anchored and embedded within the organization and across institutions. Five dimensions have been posited as central to giving rise to adoption and entrenchment including modeling, culture, education, regulation and technical rationality (Zeitz, Mittal, & McAulay, 1999). Modeling is viewed to be operative in the initial adoption phase with culture and education key features of entrenchment (Ansari, Fiss, & Zajac, 2010). Institutional theory also posits that structures and practices may be mimicked by organizations who are viewed as innovative and successful (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). There are internal and external mechanisms that support entrenchment (Zietz et al., 1999), with the most important when it comes to pay-to-play being the dependency on resources. Adopting a pay-to-play policy will bring much needed revenue to a district, helping to offset the cost of sport. School districts are choosing to adopt pay-to-play policies are doing this in a way that reflects those that have had successful adoption and entrenchment (Strang & Macy, 2001). Our study seeks to understand the trends of the adoption of pay-to-play. For this initial study, we offer a descriptive foundation from which to then extend further research related to the adoption and entrenchment of this practice.
Methods/Results
The current study merges data from the Common Core of Data from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, the Office of Civil Rights Data, and data from the (State) High School Athletic Association. We collected data from three periods to better understand trends in the scope and scale of adoption and entrenchment of pay to play practices (School Years 2002-2003, 2006-2007, 2011-2012). In total, a sample of 187 public high schools (grades 9-12) in (State) were common to the three data sets and served as the data set for this study. These schools all offered interscholastic sport during the 2011-12 school year. Data related to measures of school size, percentage of white students, percentage of students on free and reduced lunch, geographic coding, as well as number of teams, participation opportunities, and pay-to-play prevalence, were gathered from these data sets. Compared to the population of public high schools in (State) that offered interscholastic sports during the 2011-12 school year (N = 448), the sample of schools in our data set was more likely to have a higher percentage of White students, a higher percentage of students who were eligible for free or reduced price lunches, have more athletic teams, higher participation rates, and to be located in small towns or rural areas. No differences were detected between the population and the sample with respect to the percent of female students, school size, and the number of sports offered to students. The preliminary analysis revealed that roughly 59.4% of the sample of public high schools during the 2011-2012 school year have sports programs that have pay-to-play policies, with 8.6% establishing pay-to-play fees between the 1979-80 and 2001-02 school years, 24.1% establishing pay-to-play fees between the 2002-03 and 2006-07 school years, and 26.7% establishing pay-to-play fees between the 2007-08 and 2011-12 school years. Moreover, logistic regression analyses revealed that smaller schools (214 students and below) and schools considered high poverty were less likely to have interscholastic sports programs with pay-to-play fees. Additional multivariate analyses also revealed that schools that implemented pay-to-play fees had similar participation rates in interscholastic sports and provided a similar number of sports and teams when compared to schools that did not impose pay to play fees.

Discussion / Implications / Conclusions
Preliminary results thus point to a trend of pay-to-play becoming a more widely adopted, and in many cases an entrenched practice in schools, with the bulk of schools in our sample who adopted the policy doing so within the previous ten years. However, it appears that adoption has mainly occurred in schools where there is a higher enrollment or the ability of families to afford such a policy. We did not find evidence that pay-to-play policies are reducing the number of participation opportunities being provided at schools. This is a contradictory finding to what is commonly thought that charging fees will cut sports or participation opportunities within sports. Important questions remain for scholars to pursue - for instance, how have education and efforts to change culture and acceptance of this policy diffused through schools and districts? What resistance to these practices has emerged? Our presentation concludes with recommendations for future research in this domain as well as implications for decision makers in this setting.