Competitive Balance within Interscholastic Athletics: A Qualitative Analysis of State Athletic Association Commissioners

James Johnson, Ball State University
Beau Scott, Ball State University

Management/leadership
Friday, June 3, 2016
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
(Forum West 3)

Abstract 2016-145
10:55 AM

With over 7.8 million students competing annually in the United States (NFHS, 2014), interscholastic athletics is among the most popular level of sport. To manage the large numbers of schools involved, each state has an athletic association headquarters and professional staff that serves as the governing organization. Among duties of state athletic associations is to create and enforce competitive balance solutions that allow each student the opportunity to compete against other students with relatively similar resources. Equality can be a challenging task when schools are distinctly different with regard to wealth and boundary restrictions.

Review of Literature

Historically, legislating competitive balance has been difficult because of differences between public and private high schools. Public high schools typically enroll students from a designated geographical boundary, while private schools have less (or no) boundary restrictions, and typically evoke selective admission standards (Cohen, 1997; Johnson, Pierce, Tracy, & Haworth, 2014; Johnson, Tracy, & Pierce, 2015; Popke, 2012; Monahan, 2012). These differences, in addition to accusations about athletic recruiting (Epstein, 2008; Johnson et al., 2015), contribute to what has been referred to as the public/private debate, where critics argue that private schools have inherent advantages that public schools do not (Epstein, 2008; Monahan, 2012; Johnson et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2015). Results of many state tournaments support a private school advantage because of the largely disproportionate amount of championships won by private schools relative to their representation in the state (Johnson et al., 2015; Popke, 2012). The disproportionate amount of success has led some states to create competitive balance legislation targeted at private schools. For example, eight states implement a multiplier designed to increase the enrollment number used to categorize a team by multiplying the actual enrollment by a number ranging from 1.3 to 2.0 (Epstein, 2008; Johnson et al., 2015). Other states hold separate playoffs for public and private high schools, while still others employ success factors designed to move the most successful programs up in class to compete against larger schools (Johnson et al., 2015). These solutions are not created haphazardly. Most often they take years of preparation by state athletic administrators and are justified through theoretical and philosophical concepts from distributive justice - a theory used to justify benefits of groups based on their characteristics (DeSensi & Rosenberg, 2010). As noted by Johnson et al. (2015), each competitive balance solution can be justified under one of three branches of distributive justice (i.e., egalitarian, libertarian, and utilitarian). Although the aforementioned literature and theoretical perspectives do address competitive balance from a quantitative and descriptive perspective, the existing literature on interscholastic sport is quite sparse. There is a void in the literature that does not explain the sociocultural nuances that shape competitive balance policy.

Purpose

Johnson et al. (2015) explained the context from which policy decisions are shaped is an important factor for competitive balance decisions. The political, social, and historical forces contribute to these decisions and, ultimately, influence how fair and equal competitions are held within each state. In this way, each state is an interesting case study in itself. Thus, the current study answers the call by Johnson et al. (2015) to explore the context of state athletic associations. In light of the limited amount of research on interscholastic sport, and in particular the lack of literature on competitive balance, the purpose of this study is to assess the sociocultural influences on competitive balance within different states through the insight of each state's highest ranking interscholastic athletic administrator - the state commissioner or executive director.

Method
This ongoing study uses a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2003) as part of a dual method qualitative methodology that includes semi-structured in-depth interviews and secondary archival source material. Each interscholastic state athletic association serves as its own unique case study, which allows for individual investigation of the specific context within each state. Simultaneously, comparing findings from case to case (i.e., state comparisons) allows for a more comprehensive analysis across all cases. In this way, the distinctive characteristics of each state emerge as part of a larger and more inclusive analysis (Stake, 2005). The sampling strategy is purposeful and includes state associations in the Midwest portion of the United States. The states under investigation included Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The number of cases (i.e., states) meets the minimum number of cases suggested by Yin (2003) to sufficiently evaluate content and draw meaningful conclusions. While geography was a factor in the selection of the cases, it is important to note these states are a strong cross-section of differing competitive balance policies seen throughout the United States (Johnson et al., 2015). Furthermore, the commissioners/executive directors are the highest ranking administrators of interscholastic sport in their states, often serving as the driving force or facilitator of athletic legislation. During individual interviews, participants respond to six semi-structured, open-ended questions designed to address interview topics, and be true to the theoretical framework of distributive justice emphasized by Johnson et al. (2015). The questions focus on: 1) the sociocultural and historical characteristics of competitive balance, 2) the contextual elements that have shaped competitive balance, 3) the public/private issue, 4) the effectiveness of the competitive balance policies, and 5) future competitive balance trends. Each question was designed to allow for follow-up questions where probing of the contextual issues could emerge. To ensure trustworthiness (Guba, 1981), triangulation of data is achieved using several credibility-enhancing techniques. Pre-interview background profiles (Shenton, 2014), member checking via transcripts (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), reflexive field notes, and peer scrutiny (Shenton, 2004) are employed as the study transpires.

Findings and Discussion

To date, four of the six commissioner interviews are complete. Field notes and initial open coding have revealed expected and unexpected themes. For example, the theoretical framework of distributive justice described by Johnson et al. (2015) is central to the philosophy of state organizations. As anticipated, the concepts of fairness and utilitarianism are dominant in policy decisions. Unexpectedly, however, has been the importance of open enrollment within each state. Open enrollment is relatively new legislation that allows students in some states to attend any school, even if the school is public. According to the Michigan commissioner, this relatively recent law "has thrown a wet blanket" over the public/private debate because a restrictive boundary argument is less relevant. A more pressing trend appears to be creating comprehensive legislation regarding transfer rules that would ensure competitive balance. These initial themes are the basis of thick and rich understanding (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) at the state level. A more thorough discussion of each state and the overall themes will be presented upon completion and analysis of all interviews (scheduled for completion by December 1, 2015). Ultimately, this research has the ability to inform all stakeholders of interscholastic sport regarding the nuances of each state association, and the passionately debated topic of competitive balance.