The Influence of Pay-to-Play on Opportunities to Participate in Interscholastic Sport across U.S. Schools

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Intro/Framing/Context

Interscholastic sport (i.e., school sponsored sports) has been included as an extracurricular activity in schools for over a century in the United States. The reason that interscholastic sport has been supported as a vital aspect of schooling is due to the positive impact it has on academic achievement and health (Farb & Matjesko, 2012; Feldman & Matjesko, 2005; Sabo & Veliz, 2008; 2011). While nearly eight million students currently participate in interscholastic sport in the U.S. (NFHS, 2015), recent financial trends have led to budget cuts in education and the amount of resources that can be devoted to extracurricular activities (e.g., sport). With these educational budget cuts, athletic departments are under pressure to deliver safer opportunities for student-athletes with less money. This has led athletic directors to search for funding from other sources.

One source in particular that seems to be gaining in popularity is charging athletes to pay a fee in order to participate, also known as pay-to-play (Clark et al., 2012; Zdroik & Veliz, In Press). Some schools charge a one-time fee per school year, where others charge per sport, yet others charge based on the sport you participate in (i.e., football and hockey having higher fees than cross-country) (Zdroik & Veliz, In Press). Participation fees are becoming so common that over sixty percent of U.S. schools now have pay-to-play fees (Clark et al., 2012). According to a national poll, pay-to-play fees were averaging ninety-three dollars, but this does not include the cost of equipment, uniforms, or other team fees (Clark et al., 2012).

With the understanding that pay-to-play fees are now an entrenched aspect of school sport in the U.S., we know little about the impact that they have on opportunities to participate in sport within the school setting. One regional study that has been done explored this among a sample of public high schools in the state of Michigan. It was found that large schools with low levels of student poverty were more likely to have pay-to-play fees. Moreover, these schools with pay-to-play fees actually had more opportunities to participate in sport than those without fees. Although the results suggest that schools with pay-to-play fees increased the number of opportunities to participate in sport, these schools also had a larger percent of students who could afford these fees (Zdroik & Veliz, In Press).

While the regional study mentioned above provides an important analyses of how pay-to-play fees influence opportunities to participate in sport within public schools, no studies to date have assessed this question with a nationally representative sample of primary and secondary schools that offer interscholastic sports. Accordingly, this study seeks to understand how pay-to-play fees influence opportunities to participate in sport across schools in the U.S.

Methods

The data for the current study comes from the 2014 School Health Policies and Practices Study (NHPPS). The SHPPS has been conducted five times since 1994 (pay-to-play questions were introduced in 2014). The 2014 SHPPS used a multi-stage sampling design in order to capture a nationally representative sample of public and private schools (elementary, middle, and high school) in the United States. Several modules were provided to schools that asked the most appropriate school administrator to respond to questions related to health services, school environment, physical education and activity, nutrition services, mental and social services, and faculty health promotion. The response rate among the schools sampled to participate in the selected module ranged from 64% to 71%. The module used for this study that assessed interscholastic sports had a response rate of 64%; 384 schools participating out of a 610 schools selected to participate.
Preliminary Findings
Through descriptive statistics, the current study found 43.7% of schools that had interscholastic sports had pay-to-play fees. Moreover, roughly 9 different sports, on average, were offered at these schools.

According to the logistic regression model, the number of different sports offered at schools has a relatively weak negative association with whether schools have pay-to-play fees (AOR = .909; 95% CI .833, .992). In other words, as the number of different sports offered increases, the odds of having pay-to-play modestly declines. It should also be highlighted that the odds of schools having pay-to-play fees were substantially higher among both Catholic (AOR = 11.01, 95% CI 3.42, 35.45) and private schools (AOR = 14.42, 95% CI 4.53, 45.83) when compared to public schools.

The results from the OLS regression also show a weak negative association between pay-to-play fees and the number of sports schools offer students (b = -.730, SE = .344, B = -.061). The unstandardized coefficient (i.e., b = -.730) suggests that schools with pay-to-play fees have roughly 1 less sport when compared to schools without pay-to-play fees. Moreover, the OLS regression model also shows that schools in rural areas (when compared to schools in cities), middle schools and high schools (when compared to elementary schools), and schools with a larger student body (when compared to schools with 300 or fewer students) offer a larger number of different sports.

Implications for Practice and for Future Research
The study was the first to assess how pay-to-play polices influence opportunities to participate in sport among primary and secondary schools in the U.S. The results suggest that pay-to-play may be an effective policy to supplement resources to fund sports in schools located in wealthy communities, however, these polices only widen the gap with respect to unequal access to sport and other opportunities to engage in physical activity within schools located disadvantaged areas. Research continuously points to the benefits for athletic participation, not only for health reasons but also for educational achievement reasons. Therefore, more needs to be done to offer equal opportunities regarding physical health in our educational system to encourage and promote healthy lifestyles among students, particularly those attending schools in areas with high levels of poverty. Future research could focus on encompassing other opportunities for physical activity in schools including physical education opportunities, intramurals, and recreation. Other areas that could be explored are the trends of what sports are offered and their implications on participation opportunities, as ‘newer’ sports (i.e. crew, lacrosse) are added to the list of opportunities, is that impacting the participation rates. Or are ‘newer’ sports only added with participation fees, and who then is able to participate in those opportunities, what efforts are made to be inclusive of lower socioeconomic students. There are many avenues to explore the management of interscholastic sport regarding participation opportunities.