

REPORT ON CO-CURRICULAR FEES IN PENNSYLVANIA

BACKGROUND

The concept of charging fees for participation in co-curricular activities is not a new one in Pennsylvania, but it is one that has found very little support throughout the state. Of the few districts that have implemented this program during the past ten years, several have since dropped the program due to a backlash from parents or court challenges to the legality of the program in place. At present, I have found eight districts in the state (out of 501) that have a program that impacts the high school and middle school athletics programs.

METHODS

The stated purpose of this report was to "do some research on the models for co-curricular or sports participation fees and attendance passes for student activities...to know in the area, league and state -- what is being done, if anything...what are the models if there are fees...how has it been implemented and revenues generated." To address this issue, I used three avenues to solicit responses from districts around the state. The first was a posting on the PSADA (Pennsylvania State Athletic Directors Association) website requesting information. The second was a posting using Pennlink to all districts in the state requesting information from administrators in districts that have or are considering this type of program. The third method was the contacting of a member of the PSBA Board, Tom Gentzel, to see if records indicated which districts had this program in place.

From these sources, the PSBA was most helpful, sending information that has been logged since 1991 in relation to this topic. I received a list of 17 school districts that were reported to have this program in place, and 7 additional districts that had dropped this program during that same time period. I then contacted each of the 17 districts that were reported as having this structure to gather information. The results of these calls are included in chart 1.

RESULTS OF SURVEY

As I contacted each of the schools that were listed, several (9) indicated that they had dropped this program for any number of reasons. These included a lack of parental support, legal challenges, other funding sources were utilized, the logistical implementation outweighed the benefits gained, and a philosophical change occurred within the school board.

The districts that have maintained this type of program were able to sell their communities on this idea over time, and by showing that the fees generated were used to directly benefit the children that were paying them.

The districts that have these fees in place are of significantly different economic regions within the state, from the southeast to the northwest, with a sprinkling of districts from the middle of the state.

PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS

The decision to charge fees is a reflection of the educational philosophy of a district. By charging a fee, the district is making a statement about the importance and significance of athletics and activities programs. The Rose Tree Media School District has already done this, and has chosen to define these programs as co-curricular in nature. If this is no longer the philosophy, then this should be clearly stated and communicated to the community and parents whose students will be impacted by this change. If this, however, is still the case, then the philosophical direction of the district should drive the examination of a fee structure, and not whether or not this or any other year will be a difficult budget process.

- AR FELD -

The primary advantage in creating a program of this nature is to produce revenue from students and families that are using these programs. These revenues can then be used to offset general district expenses or to offset additional costs for operating the athletic department (additional insurance riders are one example).

The structure of the program could vary in a number of ways, but primarily around whether one fee would cover an entire year, or if a student would have to pay for each program joined. In either case, there would be upwards of 500 students that would be impacted to some degree at the high school, while another 300-400 could be impacted at the middle school level.

Beyond this short-term advantage, however, there are several considerations and disadvantages that should be addressed. The most significant of these are the following:

- Our programs are defined as co-curricular, and incorporate not only athletics, but also all other programs with a paid advisor. The students involved in these activities are those that we point to as our role-models and examples of positive representatives of the school. Charging them to participate would seem to send a message that runs counter to this belief.
- Many of the students that are participating in our programs are doing so to better themselves and take advantage of opportunities that are not available to them otherwise due to their family's financial situation. By instituting a fee structure, we may be turning away the very students these programs would most significantly benefit.
- Facts and data have indisputably shown that students are better in the classroom when involved in an activity after school hours. If fees cause students not to participate, then that achievement may be compromised and the grades of our students would decrease. This would come at a time when standards and benchmarks are pushing all districts toward higher achievement and accountability for all students.
- For students and families that have children participating in programs within the district, the financial burden over the course of a year may be significant, further impacting the families that may be least able to absorb those costs.
- What will be the response of a sponsor or coach when a student pays an activity fee to try out for a sport, and is then cut, or receives little playing time? Many parents would equate this fee to a right to play, with coaches and advisors being placed in a no-win position when a student expects to get equivalent playing time, or demands a refund if they do not make the team or cast. This philosophy is closer to a recreational league than it is to a competitive interscholastic program.
- The Rose Tree Media School District has defined co-curricular participation as a "privilege." To pay for participation no longer makes this a privilege but rather a financial obligation.

The issue of rising costs and diminishing revenue is a very real issue, and must be addressed in some fashion. This problem, however, is already being felt by the students of the athletic department in the form of shrinking budgets translating into less equipment and a greater wait time between expressing a need and having that need filled. To further tax these individuals for their participation is sending a message that while we want the school to be represented well, we are not willing to make the full commitment necessary to achieve that success. I hope this is not the philosophy we choose to endorse and promote.