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Pay-to-play saps parents' wallets

*Rising sports fees sideline students
The Detroit News*

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Greg Brynaert, athletic director at Romeo High School, was sitting in his office a few days after the start of football practice in August when a ninth-grader showed up to turn in his uniform.

He asked the boy why, and the answer tugged at his heart.

"Because my family can't afford the \$160 fee."

That ninth-grader, a Detroit News study has found, is one of more than 88,000 southeastern Michigan students who pay a cumulative \$10 million in fees to play sports this school year -- activities that once were considered vital to public school education, provided, if at all, free.

The pay-to-play format was a logical outcome for school districts seeking to maintain their academic mission while expenses climbed and revenues ebbed. Many districts adopted what they consider a lesser evil: charging fees for sports and other extracurricular activities, they all agree are important, or not offering them at all.

That Romeo ninth-grader was one of the lucky ones. Convinced of the boy's motivation, Brynaert promised to work with his parents toward some arrangement, and handed the kid back his uniform.

But thousands of other middle- and high-school students -- no one really knows how many -- simply walk away, victims of a system that shifts costs from schools to families, known as pay-to-play.

"Nationwide, there's about a 35 percent drop in participation when students are asked to pay for extra-curricular activities," said Diane L. Hoff, associate professor of education at the University of Maine, who has studied pay-to-play. "That, across the board, affects students of lower incomes and students who tend to be minority."

The problems compound in southeast Michigan's devastated economic climate.

"Money is generally not an issue (for parents) in this district," said Dan Fife, athletic director for Clarkston Community School, where students pay a once-yearly \$200 fee to play. "But I've had more kids this fall whose parents couldn't afford it than I did all last year."

'Tragic' consequences

Forcing parents to face such dilemmas is "tragic," said Bill Keenist, who has sent two athlete sons through Oxford High. As a member of a committee that regulates sports for the district, Keenist did an in-depth study that found "concrete data, actual factual evidence, that participation in high school athletics has such a positive impact on the young men and women, both academically, socially, in college and in life. It's overwhelming."

Days earlier, Keenist said, he had talked to a junior varsity coach who was "lamenting about a family who has young boys that couldn't participate because of pay-to-play. And I thought, that's so tragic."

But Keenist, and the parents of the other 1,100 or so athletes in the Oakland County district, had cause to rejoice. The night before -- Sept. 11 -- Oxford's school board had killed its \$150 annual pay-to-play fee, unique among the 101 districts in The News' study. Championed by Superintendent Bill Skilling, the measure mandates a refund of \$58,000 for this school year.

"Even in my (job) interview, I mentioned that pay-to-play has to go," Skilling said. "I was emphasizing ... academics, the arts and athletics all being equally important to the holistic development of our students."

At the same time, however, Pontiac's school board voted to levy participation fees on a similar number of athletes in its schools for the first time, perhaps as early as January.

Oxford is the exception; Pontiac the rule.

Only 1 district had fee in '93

Only 1 school district in 10 imposed fees for extracurricular activities in 1993. Over the next decade the rate doubled. In only four years, the rate has more than doubled again, The News' survey found: Of the 101 school districts polled, 58 (or 57.4 percent) have participation fees of some kind.

In the majority of districts, fees have risen steeply the past few years. In West Bloomfield, for example, a \$50 fee begun in 2004 has risen \$50 each September since, to \$200 this year. Plymouth-Canton schools charged \$125 two years ago, \$150 last year and \$160 this year. Bedford schools started its fee at \$40 in the 2003-04 school year; today it's \$125.

It's also important to note the \$10 million tab disclosed by the findings is for sports alone. Parents whose children are in band, drama, chess club, Quiz Bowl or a host of other extracurricular activities, face separate fees.

Two-thirds of the districts that charge fees try to soften the blow by discounting second and third sports, or imposing family caps. All reported they have mechanisms for identifying in-need students, and make every attempt to see no one is ever turned away for lack of money; but all also agreed many kids are hesitant to identify themselves as financially needy.

Forty-three districts in the study, home to 41,546 athletes, have bucked the trend and still charge no fees.

Some districts absorb costs

Some saw Michigan's financial handwriting on the wall years ago.

"We made cuts to the bone and reduced where we could," said Ernie Sciallo, athletic director at Sterling Heights High. Pay-to-play, he said, "has been discussed the past two years, but the board, the administrators and the public all decided, no, this isn't the time."

Others simply see athletics as fundamental to education.

In the Madison school district, no-fee athletics "form an integral part of the secondary instructional program," Superintendent Paul J. Rogers said in an e-mail.

Some districts are simply too poor to impose fees.

Detroit officials say too many families of their nearly 11,000 athletes would never be able to meet the burden of sports fees.

"The subject comes up every year, but it never goes anywhere," said Eunice Moore, director of health and physical education for Detroit schools.

The forced alternative is to offer a bare-bones athletic menu. In Detroit schools there are usually no more than 13 varsity sports. In each of Ann Arbor's two high schools, where a one-time fee of only \$30 is charged for most sports (football is \$180), there are 32.

Some schools -- those in Lake Orion, for example -- have imposed fees and seen participation rates still increase, but they were in the minority in the study.

It's either-or dilemma

Dan Danosky, athletic director for Pinckney Community Schools, where sports carry a \$175 fee, said the correlation between fees and lower participation is "something we're always worried about. We have the same dilemma with free or reduced lunch. Kids that identify themselves, or families identifying kids as in need, drop as kids get older because there is that stigma of having to ask for something that they can't afford."

"So what's the answer?" asked a frustrated Brynaert of Romeo High. "Stop pay-for-play? That's 50 percent of my budget. What do we do then? Tell all the ninth-graders and middle-schoolers there's no more sports for them? Cut some senior high sports? Instead of having 20 kids who can't play, having 140 who can't play? Or 300? Or 500?"

"That's the hard reality. Each direction is bad. Each direction is wrong."

Hard reality is exactly what thousands of Michigan families face -- paying what amounts to an undeclared tax, or telling their kids they can't play sports.

Charley and Catherine Fresch of Royal Oak faced that decision, when Charley's tooling job at Lear Corp. vanished. Their son John was a lifelong hockey player, but Royal Oak High's fee is \$750. That necessitated a family conference. Hockey won.

"It's heartbreaking when you lose your job, and you have to sit here and look at your son and know that hockey is the most enjoyable thing that he has in his life at this point in time," Charley Fresch said. "He's young, and he lives to play hockey."

"You find ways of coming up with the money."

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