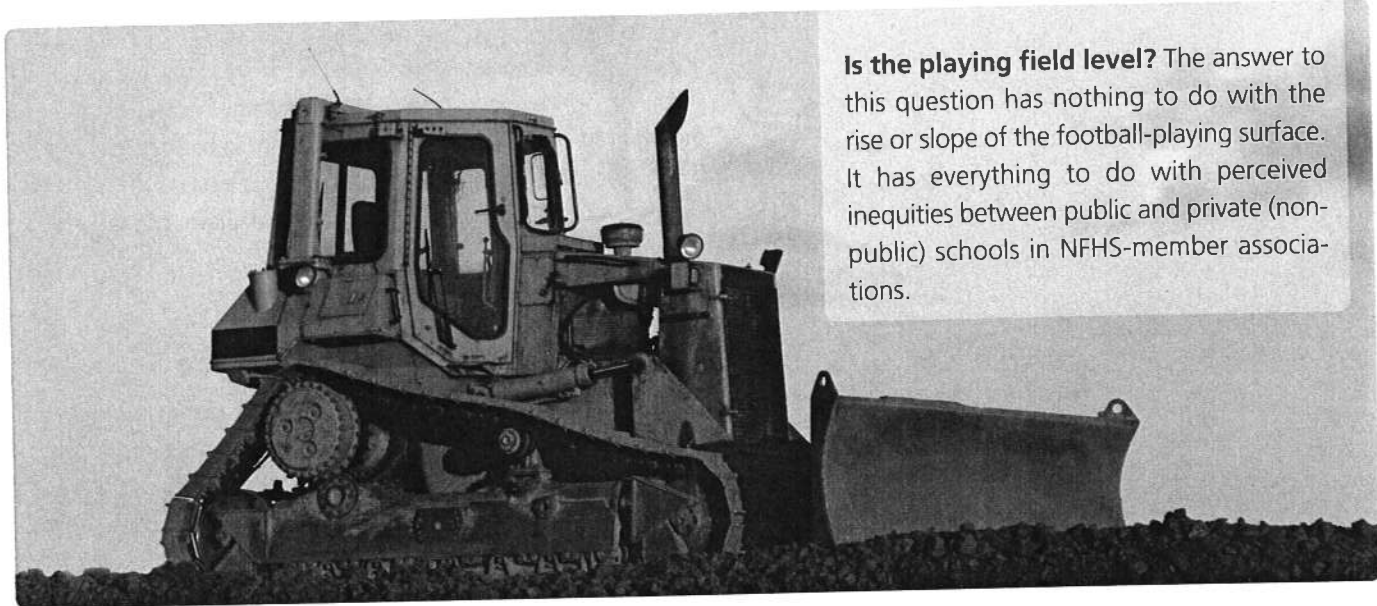


THE DEBATE CONTINUES
FOOD FOR THOUGHT.

Public vs. Private Schools - Leveling the Playing Field

BY SHANE MONAGHAN



Is the playing field level? The answer to this question has nothing to do with the rise or slope of the football-playing surface. It has everything to do with perceived inequities between public and private (non-public) schools in NFHS-member associations.

A number of state high school governing bodies have been confronted with this issue and have employed various strategies – everything from surveys, to special committees, to multiplier rules and separate championships. But is there a need for concern about inequity between public and non-public schools, or is it much ado about nothing?

"This is an ongoing problem in [Rhode Island]," said Tom Mezzanotte, executive director of the Rhode Island Interscholastic League. "We have a number of both private and parochial schools that play many sports in many different classifications."



Kerwin Urhahn, executive director of the Missouri State High School Activities Association (MSHSAA), said, "For certain sports, the non-public schools do win at a higher percentage than the number of non-public schools we have participating in that sport, [with] soccer, volleyball, tennis and golf [having] the highest percentage of non-public schools in the final four."

Since 2009, eight of the 51 state associations have adopted a

multiplier formula, which calls for private schools to multiply the number of their enrolled students by a designated multiplier. This, in turn, reclassifies smaller, private schools to compete against larger, public schools in sporting events. Although seemingly unfair, the underlying issue in the "public vs. non-public" debate has been the dominance of non-public schools in sports championships. *

"Generally speaking in Indiana, in our team sports, while private schools make up about 14 percent of our membership, they are winning approximately 40 percent of the team state championships," said Bobby Cox, executive director of the Indiana High School Athletic Association (IHSAA)



The Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) also is experiencing dominance by non-public schools in certain sports. Currently, state championships are being claimed by non-public schools at a rate of 70 percent in wrestling, 63 percent in volleyball, 50 percent in girls soccer and baseball, 47 percent in football and 45 percent in boys soccer.



"Sixteen percent of our state-sponsored schools are non-public," said Dan Ross, OHSAA commissioner. "When 16 percent is winning 70 percent [of state titles] in any sport, there's a problem."

Another daunting issue in this debate is that of recruitment of student-athletes by non-public schools.

"Our state association works very closely with schools on these issues," Mezzanotte said. "All of our private and parochial schools conduct preseason meetings with all coaches, parents and athletes to explain and discuss our recruiting rules. In most cases, private and parochial coaches found in violation of our recruiting rules will be terminated. However, regardless of our efforts and the efforts of our private and parochial schools, the public has the perception that athletes are 'recruited' and are given scholarships."



In Wisconsin, all schools have realigned under the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association (WIAA). For a number of years, all private schools had their own governing association.

"The vast majority of concerns we receive about private schools 'winning too much' come from the general public – not from our member schools," said Dave Anderson, executive director of the WIAA. "In fact, our members have gone on record indicating they do not wish to see one segment of our membership treated differently than [all other members]."



In most cases, state associations facing this "problem" have rules in place to halt such activity before it ever begins.

"Transferring primarily for athletic reasons and undue influence is covered by rule in the IHSAA bylaws," Cox said. "On occasion, the association has been able to secure credible testimony pertaining to acts of undue influence being used to persuade a student to change schools."

However, according to the MSHSAA, there are more than just recruiting problems on the horizon.

"In Missouri, there are three separate concerns I hear from schools," Urhahn said. "It depends upon where the school is located. The schools in St. Louis have concerns about recruiting and parents getting together when their children are young to pick a school to attend. The Kansas City schools are concerned about the students coming from out of state to compete against Missouri kids. Finally, the out-state schools are concerned about kids who live in their community attending a non-public school in a neighboring community and having to compete against a student they view as their kid."

To combat these problems, many state associations have formed committees to help alleviate the pressure of the "public vs. non-public" debate.

"The IHSAA has, over several years, maintained a public/private competition committee," Cox said. "Occasionally, a coaches association in our state or a member school principal will submit a pro-

posal to amend our bylaws regarding this topic. My current sense is that future proposals will find their way to the IHSAA staff, a competition committee and ultimately to our Board of Directors for consideration at its annual meeting."

The IHSAA is not alone.

"We have formed a public/non-public committee that meets in the fall and spring each year," said Lance Taylor, executive director of the Arkansas Activities Association. "It is made up of 10 public school administrators and 10 non-public school administrators. They communicate together and come up with solutions to any problems. The committee has worked very well for our state and has developed good solutions to the problems we have been facing."



In January of 2010, in response to concerns about non-public schools dominating at the state-tournament level, the OHSAA created the Competitive Balance Committee.

"We have a committee, made up of both non-public and public schools from across the state, that has worked very hard and continues to work very hard in trying to weigh the options; hear the feedback from coaches, schools and the community; and create systems that can [make the issue] better," Ross said.

Last May, the committee produced a proposal to change how schools are assigned to divisions, but the proposal was voted down by a margin of 332-303.

"We had a referendum voted on for the classifications between non-public and public schools, [but] it did not pass," Ross said. "What the referendum was meant to do is put different weight on various factors of classifications – socioeconomics, boundaries and tradition – to equalize divisions.

Recently, there have been discussions by some OHSAA member schools to file a petition to have separate tournaments for public and non-public schools. However, a petition would need to be signed by 75 principals, including a minimum of five principals within each of the six OHSAA athletic districts, and would need to be voted upon before being approved. In both 1978 and 1993, a vote to separate public and non-public schools failed overwhelmingly.

Texas and Georgia have recently made changes to their stances on the "public vs. non-public" issue. The Texas Senate voted to allow private schools to join the University Interscholastic League in all sports except for football and basketball, and the Georgia High School Association expanded from five divisions to six beginning with the 2012-13 school year. The change came in light of Georgia's Class A championships being dominated by non-public schools, which have won 26 of the 28 state championships (outside of football, wrestling and boys track) since the start of the 2008 school year.

"The mere fact that private schools may admit certain students and deny other students into their institutions creates an advantage for the private school that the public school does not enjoy," Cox



said. "In Indiana, approximately 70 percent of private school students participate in extracurricular activities while approximately 30 percent of public school students choose to participate. That imbalance in and of itself creates a disparity."

This year, a record seven of the 10 schools that played in the Indiana State Finals over Thanksgiving weekend were non-public schools. While some state associations are just beginning to become proactive in the debate on fairness, others have been "fighting the fight" for many years.

"[Twelve years ago] the MSHSAA-member schools voted in a multiplier to be applied to non-public schools to try to level the playing field," Urhahn said. "Five years ago, another petition was submitted to establish separate championships, but that failed. Because of that petition, the MSHSAA Board of Directors established an ad hoc committee to look at the issues. From that committee came recommendations to address the public/non-public issue. One item that is still in place is the formation of a standing committee to address public/non-public issues. The committee feels the need for additional and open communication is a necessity."

Along with the MSHSAA, the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association (TSSAA) implemented a multiplier about 13 years ago, while also deciding to divide its championships into two divisions. The divisions are split on "need-based financial aid."



"If you ask some of the public school people, they are still not satisfied by the split," TSSAA Executive Director Bernard Childress said. "Since the multiplier has come into effect, many smaller schools have been placed in a higher classification. There are complaints from private schools that the multiplier is too high, and that they are not able to compete with the enrollment. However, the Board is planning to take a look at the multiplier, and whether or not it is too high. Some schools are in two classes higher than they would be, and the Board wants it to be less than one class. Other than that, the Board is satisfied with the way we do [things] now."

Cox believes that change is imminent.

"I believe in the next 5-10 years, we may see some sort of 'competition clause' that would place premiums on winning certain levels of IHSAA tournaments and that factor being applied to the classification of the school in a particular team sport," Cox said.

Ross said the OHSAA has kept public and non-public schools together, "as most schools believe that staying together will keep [the OHSAA] strong," but concurs with Cox that there will be changes.

"There probably needs to be some modification in how students come into private schools and public schools," he said. "Do I believe that there will be some modifications? Yes, this is a journey that we

will be on and be on it for awhile. We just want to make it fair for everybody."

So what does the future hold for the "public vs. non-public" debate? There may be as many problems as solutions.

"There is no simple solution or crystal ball available to predict the future of this issue," Mezzanotte said. "The economy has an effect on not only private and parochial schools, but on our public schools and their ability to provide an adequate athletic program. Can our private and parochial schools maintain the quality of education that is being sought by our public schools, and vice versa?"

Urhahn agrees.

"We just want to make it fair for everybody."

"It is my belief that the difference between public and non-public schools many times is not simply how the school is identified, but the parental involvement and socioeconomic support of the students attending each institution," Urhahn said. "If we look at all schools – public and non-public – that have success in all sports, it is my belief the opportunities presented to the students because of location (metropolitan area) and financial resources available have a significant impact on athletic success. There is nothing that schools can do to change those opportunities for all students in the state.

"That being said, I do not believe that if you do not have opportunity or resources, a school cannot be successful. We are educational-based athletics, and hard work, discipline, commitment to team and skill can overcome any perceived advantage of socioeconomic resource. Also, we must get beyond the fact that just because you do not win a championship, does not mean the year was a failure. We must remember that sports teach life lessons, and there is always an opportunity for us to learn for those lessons."

"As long as the majority feel like the championships are being won by a small amount of schools, it will be an issue that will continue to be discussed," Childress said. "Every state has the problem. I've been [with the TSSAA] for 18 years, and [the debate] hasn't gone away. We always discuss the issue, and it continues to be discussed. I don't think that anyone has come up with a national answer for this. You just have to do what is best, and what works for your state. The question is, how do we level the playing field? Until we come to that conclusion, [the debate] will always be there."

"It will be an issue that is always present," Urhahn said. "There will never be a time that people will not be passionate about their local high school team, and their desire to win a high school championship." Ⓣ

Shane Monaghan is an intern in the NFHS Publications/Communications and Events Departments. Monaghan is a graduate of Ball State (Indiana) University, where he specialized in sports administration.