

The missing link

Our unique national structure for educationally based athletics may have a crack in the foundation.

The most recent evidence came in August when voters in the South-Western City Schools in central Ohio defeated a tax issue that would have reinstated half of \$8 million in cuts that were made after another tax issue failed in May. The outcome of the August vote threatened athletics programs, along with many other programs and extracurricular activities, in the sixth-largest district in the nation's seventh largest state.

Many citizens believed that the local school board played a game of "chicken," co-mingling taxes for activities with funding for outright educational programs rather than mandating a pay-to-play option. Proponents of the two initiatives countered that the economic profile of the district makes pay-to-play unworkable.

Ultimately, the situation represents a classic 21st century dilemma: Parents say they can't pay for the experience, and taxpayers say they won't. Another election is in the offing, and school authorities are exploring a pay-to-play option for athletics.

For those who believe in educationally based athletics, this is a troubling case because so few people involved seem to see a direct correlation between athletics and education. On the Columbus Dispatch Web site, not a single person among more than 100 commentators explicitly took the position that athletics *belongs* in the schools.

The regrettable fact is that high school (and college) athletics programs have lost their ways at times, leaving the door open to critics who assert that sports is not really a complement to education. This argument is nothing new at the college level, where the matter is debated all

the time, both inside and outside the NCAA. Ultimately, of course, colleges and universities themselves choose whether to sponsor athletics.

High schools, however, find themselves in a more awkward spot.

Despite near-record participation and abundant (and generally favorable) media coverage, high school sports may be more vulnerable than at any time in their history. If taxpayers – led by a rapidly growing wave of empty nesters – are not convinced that a clear relationship exists between sports and education, they may be willing to vote high school athletics out of business, as they may be doing with the South-Western district in Ohio.

High school leaders recognize the crisis and do not mince words in describing it.

“Most people don’t really believe athletics is educational in nature,” said Tim Flannery, assistant director for the National Federation of State High School Associations.

The NFHS has responded admirably. Rather than positioning the problem as an image issue (that is, that the public simply does not *understand* the educational nature of athletics), the organization has acknowledged a shortcoming and has moved to enhance the educational role of coaches. This is being accomplished primarily through a comprehensive education program and certification.

The NFHS, almost ironically, is challenging the notion that sports builds character. Instead, the organization has taken the position that sports builds character only if character development is taught as part of the experience. Schools are the logical place for such instruction to occur, but success will occur only if major changes are made at this base level of American sports.

If the NFHS succeeds in its effort (and the early feedback is positive), the benefits that would accrue to higher education are apparent enough. But what if it is too late to harness the

tide? What if future prospects for college sports come from club systems rather than schools? Might athletics become the province of only those who can afford to play? If academics and athletics became segregated in the high schools, might colleges consider following suit?

If anticipating the problem places us on the road to a solution, surely an important step is for colleges to embrace their loftier side – what NCAA President Myles Brand has called the collegiate model of sports. While hundreds of local factors may have led to the unfortunate outcome in Ohio’s South-Western school district, one large national misunderstanding provided the fuse: Too many people believed that all sports are based on the professional model.

Unlike high schools, college athletics programs are not likely to find themselves facing a voter referendum. But, as shown in Ohio and elsewhere, many citizens are paying attention and coldly assessing the educational worth of interscholastic and intercollegiate sports.

So far, it’s not clear that they can distinguish the sizzle from the steak.

Reaction

Comments posted to the Columbus Dispatch in the wake of a failed tax referendum in central Ohio:

“Why let a little levy failure stop you from giving your money away so a few students can play sports? Maybe when they make it to the NFL they can reimburse the district, and then they won’t have to put any more levies on the ballot.”

– Ghostryder

“Pay to Play would work. The school board just used it to hold voters hostage PERIOD. There is no reason it won’t. It works in rich and so-called poor schools all over Ohio. So crying that some can’t afford it is BS.”

– Bodie

“Americans don’t understand sacrifice anymore. During World War II the nation was turned upside down and lives were changed forever and massive sacrifices were made all to support the war effort. EVERYONE CHIPPED IN. Few complained, because the cause was just and everyone wanted to do their part. Well, for these kids, it’s life or death, too -- their lives, their futures, their education. What they do or don’t do today affects everything else for the rest of their lives.

“Today instead of ‘how can I help?’ you have people saying ‘sorry, can’t help you -- blame someone else’ – the school board, the township residents, the kids who play sports, the statehouse, etc. No one seems to regret their vote. Everyone seems to be proud of the ‘message’ they sent. What a shame.”

– poor SWCD kids

“So I guess it was ok that the board used the kids as pawns? They played a game of chicken and lost. It’s really sad. Again I don’t feel selfish. No high schools will close and they will still get an education. I’m sorry I don’t want to pay for everyone’s kids to play sports. I shouldn’t have to foot that bill. When my kids are older I will gladly pay for them to play. I will gladly keep paying property taxes so kids can get an education.”

– Unconstitutional