



OSAA Equity and Diversity Newsletter

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Increasing Student Participation, Retention in High School Sports

By Nate Perry on November 06, 2019

Promoters of participation in high school sports face more challenges now than ever before. Budget cuts, single-sport specialization, and even the ever-expanding use of social media and technology present real obstacles for those trying to get more kids to 'go out for the team.' As the central theme for his presentation at the 2018 National Athletic Directors Conference in San Antonio, Texas, Dr. Robert Zayas discussed ways to overcome these challenges and help keep an upward trajectory for participation numbers.

Zayas, the executive director of the New York State Public High School Athletic Association (NYSPHSAA), believes the most impactful way to help the cause is simply to advocate for the numerous benefits of sports participation that may go unrecognized by community leaders, school board members, non-athletics faculty members, parents and even the student-athletes themselves.

"Athletics is not just sports you play after school, it's an extension of the classroom," said Zayas, who is in his seventh year as the head of the NYSPHSAA. "Learning continues to take place after that final school bell rings, and we have to promote that because sometimes more learning is done after 3:30 p.m. than during what took place prior to 3:30 when you look at the impact it's going to have on a student and the rest of his or her life."

In addition to the various studies that show participation in school-sponsored activities is linked to higher attendance, grade point averages, educational aspirations and college acceptance rates, student-athletes also develop a wide variety of life skills including accountability, communication, responsibility, time management, the value of commitment and teamwork and the ability to accept constructive criticism.

A major threat to progressive participation rates is the elimination or reduction of athletic programs through school budget cuts. While cutbacks affect educational districts all over the country, and funding for athletics remains a top target, Zayas believes that highlighting the values derived from participation can present a strong case for retaining financial support.

"Typically, athletics seems to be the focal point of budget cut discussions, and that's unfortunate," he said. "When they are the focal point, promoting the benefits that kids receive from participating is always a great tool to utilize for athletic administrators because, nowadays, a lot of school administrators did not begin their careers as a middle school coach or a junior varsity assistant. They didn't work their way up through the athletic programs, so they don't truly understand what it means to participate in athletics."

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Specialization – or students focusing all their abilities on one sport – also brings about negative effects on overall participation, especially at the youth sports level. Zayas admitted that specializing in high school can be attractive for students in bigger school districts but opined that doing so prior to that stage denies kids the opportunity to truly understand what sport they’re most interested in. In contrast, he pointed out that multi-sport participation has distinct advantages that need to be publicized.

“Being subjected to a different atmosphere has a variety of benefits within multi-sport participation,” Zayas explained. “Multisport student-athletes take direction from somebody other than the coach they see year-round, they make a different set of friends, and they work with an alternative group to accomplish a different goal.”

From a physiological standpoint, Zayas also said that competing in additional sports allows athletes to rest certain muscle groups and activate others, which simultaneously lessens the risk of injury from overuse and strengthens areas that would otherwise remain underdeveloped.

The other key section of Zayas’ workshop addressed some athletic departments’ failure to adapt their marketing style to generate more student interest. He introduced a number of ways to be more innovative, such as incentivizing/ rewarding students who compete, creating junior varsity or middle school programs for existing sports, increasing schedule length, exploring competition against other state associations, finding new sources of revenue, and annexing a new sport that is on the rise.

Some schools in the NYSPHSAA have taken Zayas’ advice and broken the traditional mold for promotion. For example, at Palmyra- Macedon (Pal-Mac) High School, just east of Rochester, student- athletes can accrue participation “points” for each team they suit up for. Per sport, students earn 75 points for each year of varsity participation, 50 points for junior varsity participation, 20 for being named a team’s most valuable player, 15 for team captaincy and 15 for breaking a school record. Plaques are then awarded to participants who reach either the 500- or 1,000-point plateaus.

Another school in the Rochester area, Pittsford Sutherland High School, has encouraged multi-sport participation by coordinating the schedules of in-season practices and offseason workouts so students don’t have to decide which one to attend. PSHS has also incorporated a universal approach to its strength and conditioning program, which reassures athletes that they are not losing any physical progression for a particular sport.

Other initiatives are focused on building interest in future students. These ideas, according to Zayas, bear the highest potential for participation gains.

“The programs with the best opportunity to succeed are the ones that are targeting younger kids and getting them engrained in the community at an early age,” he said. “This creates the next generation of high school athletes.”

One of these concepts has been established at Whitney Point High School in Triangle, New York, where high school students host an athletic fair for middle school students during lunch periods, creating a unique channel for in-person testimonials for each sport program. In addition, physical education classes at Whitney Point are aligned with the corresponding in-season sports to build interest and excitement.



Eden High School, located just a few miles from the shores of Lake Ontario, has its own version of the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program. Throughout each season, high school teams hold mini-clinics for elementary students who are then invited to the games, selected to be ball boys/ball girls, and take part in halftime performances. The program transcends the athletic forum, as Big Brothers/Big Sisters will occasionally be guest readers in elementary classrooms and eat lunch with their respective Little Brothers/ Little Sisters.

Centrally-located Homer High School found a solution to its low wrestling numbers by holding practices at the middle school right after class dismissal. By catching the eyes of its future high school students, Homer has seen interest in wrestling grow and a subsequent rise in participants.

Taking on emerging sports like ultimate frisbee or esports in response to fresh streams of student interest can be an arduous and expensive process for most schools, but, in the interest of increasing participation, Zayas says it is an avenue that should at least be given a watchful eye and an open channel of communication.

“It’s important that we provide opportunities to impact as many kids as possible,” Zayas said. “As athletic administrators, we may not understand certain sports. We may not think that ultimate frisbee or snowboarding is going to benefit our school, but if there are 25 kids that are snowboarders, and we can get them integrated into our school at a minimal expense to the budget, why not consider that? Or, if there is a group of kids who are already organizing themselves to play ultimate frisbee on Saturday mornings, maybe that’s a great way to get them involved.”

Zayas closed his presentation by revealing what he believes to be the ultimate benefit of athletic participation – a sense of belonging. Being part of a team gives students an immediate group of friends and fosters the notion that they are not alone as they walk the halls each day. In a world where bullying, hazing and other social issues persist, having that support system can make all the difference.

Full article: <https://www.nfhs.org/articles/increasing-student-participation-retention-in-high-school-sports/>

Other resources:

NFHS: Increasing Participation in Girls Sports: <https://www.nfhs.org/media/6553438/workshop-5.pdf>

NFHS Sportsmanship Course

The NFHS developed this free course to give you a better understanding of sportsmanship, how it impacts the educational process and identifies your specific role in modeling it at all interscholastic athletic events. Insight is shared throughout the course from fans, players, parents, teacher-coaches and officials. This course will help provide schools a more positive game environment. Link to this free NFHS course: <https://nfhslearn.com/courses/sportsmanship-2>

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