

Trends and Issues in Middle-Level Sports

Middle-level sports programs can be defined as intramural, interscholastic, or a combination of both. Competitive interscholastic sports programs, in which schools compete with other schools in league or conference settings, are now found in the vast majority of schools that include the middle grades. A national survey found that 96 percent of all public middle schools had competitive interscholastic sports programs (McEwin & Swaim, 2007), and a national study of K-8 elementary schools found that 94 percent of those schools had middle-level interscholastic sports programs.

The significant increase in these schools with interscholastic sports programs represents a break from past practice. For example, only 50 percent of middle schools had interscholastic sports programs in 1968, and 77 percent in 1993. The middle-level sports study also found that only 58 percent of middle schools had intramural sports programs. Since intramural programs are typically organized in ways that allow wide participation and do not include competition with other schools, this means that many young adolescents are being denied opportunities to participate in organized sports (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jacobson, 2004; McEwin & Swaim, 2007).

The trend toward middle-level interscholastic sports programs has been accompanied by recurring and sometimes controversial issues for principals. For example, which age groups and grade levels should be allowed to participate? Which sports should be offered? Should these programs be inclusive, no-cut programs, or should they focus only on the most talented student athletes? What can be done to make interscholastic programs as inclusive and as safe as possible? These and related questions often result in spirited discussions about the proper nature and role of middle-level sports.

Interscholastic Sports: Pros and Cons

On one side of the debate are those who advocate for middle-level sports programs that are inclusive and developmentally responsive. They cite



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research that recognizes the dangers of middle-level interscholastic sports models that mimic those intended for use with older adolescents and adults. They also note recent research that documents increases in injury rates, concerns about psychological stress, instances of unqualified adult leadership, and high attrition rates in middle-level sports programs (Cary, 2004; Centers for Disease Control, 2002; Engh, 2002; Mac, 1998; McEwin & Dickinson, 1998; McEwin & Swaim, 2007; Noonan, 2003). Possible solutions to these concerns may include modifications of rules, fielding of multiple teams in the same sport, no-cut

policies, careful monitoring of coaches' qualifications, required comprehensive physical examinations, and everyone-plays policies.

On the other side of the debate are those who see middle-level sports as preparation for high school—and in some cases even college or professional—sports.

They often include parents who favor highly competitive, very selective sports programs as ways to prepare their sons and daughters for future successes in high school and beyond. Some coaches and athletic directors also resist reforms because they want middle-level sports programs to focus directly and exclusively on developing the most gifted athletes, often at the expense of those who are just developing their athletic talents.

Many principals understand the dangers of having middle-level sports programs in their schools that do not reflect what is known about the developmental characteristics of young adolescents. Nevertheless, there is a lack of knowledge about what developmentally responsive sports programs are, and why and how they should be implemented.

Recommendations for Principals

The following recommendations are provided for principals who are responsible for middle-level sports programs.

Develop and articulate a clearly stated and developmentally responsive sports philosophy. Schools without a written sports philosophy run the risk of having programs that are haphazardly organized and characterized by inconsistent and inequitable practices. Clearly stated philosophies give coaches and others needed direction.

Employ coaches who are knowledgeable about the nature of developmentally responsive middle-level sports programs and committed to implementing them. It is essential for middle-level coaches to be knowledgeable about the sports they coach as well as the implications of those sports when working with young adolescents.

Provide adequate and equitable human and financial resources for all phases of the sports program. Both intramural and

interscholastic programs should be adequately funded and provided with sufficient human resources.

Assign a top priority to making middle-level sports programs as safe as possible.

In addition to proper supervision, young athletes should be provided with equipment designed to protect them from injuries.

Organize middle-level sports programs that encourage young adolescents to participate in multiple sports rather than specializing in one. Specializing in a single sport does not give young athletes opportunities to see where their talents lie and frequently leads to high attrition rates. Having young adolescents play the same sport in interscholastic, community-sponsored, and club leagues also substantially increases injury rates.

Establish rules that ensure the widest possible degree of participation. Every effort should be made to allow students who wish to participate in school sports to do so.

Modifying the size of balls and lengths of courts or fields, using the


no-press rule in basketball, shortening distances in softball and baseball, and having coaches in the huddle during football games are appropriate for young adolescent athletes.

Offer sports programs that include intramural and interscholastic sports. Offering both provides more opportunities for students to participate.

Help parents understand productive and appropriate ways they can be involved in supporting their children's participation. Orientation meetings, brochures describing the sports program and its philosophy, and information posted on the school Web site are examples of ways to keep parents informed and help them understand the roles they should and should not play.

Establish clearly articulated and equitable eligibility policies that support the school's commitment to academics. Teachers and coaches want students to be successful in classrooms as well as on the athletic fields. However, the academic performance of some student athletes frequently becomes a problem requiring carefully planned and widely understood eligibility policies.

Operate sports programs in ways that maximize participation and enjoyment.

The emphasis in middle-level sports programs should be on enhancing self-esteem and developing social and physical skills within reasonably competitive environments. All young adolescents should have opportunities to participate and receive the benefits of sports programs that reflect their developmental needs and interests. Sports participation for young adolescents should be fun! 

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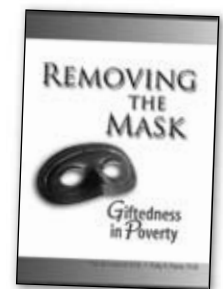
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