

Poor Schools Keep Getting Crushed in Football. Is It Time to Level the Playing Field?

By Timothy Williams

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DES MOINES — An hour before kickoff at a game this month at Hoover High School, the opposing football team, Indianola High, pulled up and unloaded the large video monitor that would let its coaching staff analyze plays, moment by moment, throughout the game. The coaches at Hoover High, where most students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, would have to make do with watching the old-fashioned way. Another loss, a Hoover student told the principal, seemed imminent.

Indianola ran 84 yards for a touchdown on their first play, the running back shedding Hoover's smaller players like a video-game villain. The game ended in a 35-7 loss for Hoover, to no one's surprise.

During the past decade, Hoover High and Des Moines's four other large public high schools have a cumulative record of 0-104 against rivals with more affluent student bodies from the Polk County suburbs, according to figures compiled by The Des Moines Register. They rarely do any better against similar opponents from beyond the county, like Indianola. The disparity has been the topic of news articles and impassioned conversations across the state, from Sioux City to Davenport.

With all that losing, leaders in places like Des Moines are contemplating a change in how high school athletic teams are matched up against one another: What if the poverty level of a school's student body was used to decide which teams it played?

The concept, now in use or under consideration in numerous American states and cities, turns on its head old notions of athletics as an equalizer. The thought of intentionally lumping poor schools into lesser divisions, separate from richer schools that have fancy equipment and larger and more specialized coaching staffs, rankles some educators, who say it sends a terrible message.

"Our kids don't want to be classified as poor kids who have to play lower-level competition," said Mitchell Moore, a coach at Roosevelt High School in Des Moines. "I'm a big believer that socioeconomic has nothing to do with catching a football."

But at Hoover, where losing has gotten exhausting for players and fans alike, moving down to a lower division would be a welcome relief, many parents and students say. The idea of judging teams based on wealth may sound distasteful in concept, but the reality of losing night after night, year after year, feels far worse. And schools with extra resources for special training and technology, they say, simply do better on the field — so why not acknowledge that in the matchups?



“On just about every Friday night, they outsize us, they outman us, and they outnumber us,” Sherry Poole, Hoover’s principal, said about the suburban powerhouses they compete against. KC McGinnis for The New York Times

“On just about every Friday night, they outsize us, they outman us, and they outnumber us,” Sherry Poole, Hoover’s principal, said about the suburban powerhouses on the school’s schedule that routinely win state championships. “Your heart just kind of stops whenever someone gets crushed.”

Dustin Hagler, a 17-year-old senior who plays on both the offensive and defensive lines for Hoover High, and is also the senior class president, said that he saw students in the hallways who would make good football players, but that they consistently resisted his recruiting efforts.

“It’s hard when you lose,” he said. “But it’s not just losing. It’s almost like you feel beat down. Like the odds are stacked against you.”

Over the past few years, officials overseeing high school sports in states including Minnesota, Oregon and Colorado have added provisions allowing schools with high poverty levels to drop down to lower athletic divisions. Washington State will introduce the idea next year, and Iowa is considering it.

Schools are commonly assigned to athletic divisions based on their enrollment, and Hoover, with more than 1,000 students, has long been placed in the state’s top athletic division, competing with the largest of Iowa’s public and private high schools. Its traditional rivals include city schools with relatively high poverty rates, but also suburban schools that have won the past nine state championships.

Ways of gauging poverty levels vary, but state athletic officials typically rely on the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches. At Hoover, about 75 percent qualify, compared with about 10 percent, on average, in neighboring suburban schools. At Indianola High, Hoover’s opponent on that recent game night, about 21 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

The debate over whether economic status should have a place in deciding a sports team’s competition has been fierce. The issue has led to awkward conversations among school administrators, parents and teammates, raising questions about fairness and the meaning of high school sports.

Supporters say the approach, intended to give poorer schools a better chance of winning games, will help students gain confidence. They also say it could reduce the risk of concussions and other injuries against teams with more expensive and elaborate training resources and access to better nutrition.



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KC McGinnis for The New York Times

“We don’t feel like we are coddling these students; we feel like we are trying to put them on an even playing field,” said Peter Weber, executive director of the Oregon School Activities Association, which oversees high school athletics. “We need to match kids up with competition that is safe for them so they can walk out on a field and be competitive.”

But others, including many coaches, say the change adds new barriers for impoverished students, and suggests they are too weak or too poor to compete against richer rivals. Why, they ask, should students’ athletic potential be limited by their parents’ bank accounts? And some opponents say tinkering with longstanding athletic matchups in an attempt to even the odds is a way of babying young people — a “medals for everyone” mentality that undermines lessons in resilience and grit.

“They’re out there making do with what they have, and that’s the right thing to do,” said Gabe Murray, 19, a former Hoover football player.

Tom Farrey, executive director of the Aspen Institute’s Sports & Society Program, said the sports achievement disparity between wealthy suburban public schools and their urban counterparts has degenerated into “a competitive gap that is similar to the income gap” in the nation.

“The divide has always been there,” he said, “but it has widened.”

The disparity, experts say, is meaningful beyond the world of athletics because sports participation has been found to aid in academic success and college admissions, and is a predictor for professional success.

The discussion comes at a critical juncture for youth sports, where participation rates for many activities — particularly football — are in decline because of fears about brain injury and because children’s interests more than ever fall outside engagement in traditional sports, according to studies.

For the moment, switching leagues is not yet an option in Iowa, where the Iowa High School Athletic Association is scheduled to discuss the issue later this year. If a request by the Des Moines Public Schools and other districts is approved, Hoover and other schools could apply to drop down a division.

Historically, the imbalance in high school sports has been between public schools and private schools, which are often able to recruit students and offer scholarships.



Hoover has long been placed in the state's top athletic division with Iowa's other largest public and private high schools. KC McGinnis for The New York Times

In Iowa, which has comparatively few large private schools that excel in sports, tension has centered around disparities between public high schools that have similar enrollment sizes but very different student demographics.

Thomas Ahart, superintendent of the Des Moines Public Schools, said students in the district must often work after-school jobs to support their families, which prevents many from participating in sports.

Dr. Ahart and others have pointed to the correlation between schools that win championships and how few students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

Across all Iowa schools, the percentage of students who qualify for such meals is about 43 percent, while Dr. Ahart said Des Moines's dominant suburban sports schools have rates around 7 percent. In Des Moines public schools, about three-quarters of students qualify for free meals.

"There's a real issue of equity of opportunity, and the foundation of the problem is tied most directly to poverty," he said. "Even if we do everything right, the chances of us getting a victory is slim to none."

Mr. Farrey, from the Sports & Society Program, said he believed more effort should be made by schools to encourage students — whatever their skill level — to play sports, instead of focusing primarily on winning and competitiveness.

"Kids do sports because they are looking to do something larger than themselves," he said. "It's not about whether you win. Sports are fun."

But in Des Moines, high school football has not been much fun in recent years, some players said.

Kyle Fischer, whose son, Jerad Fischer, is Hoover's quarterback, said wealthier schools have an undeniable advantage, so moving Hoover to a lower league would simply be recognizing that truth. He said that neither parents nor schools should be ashamed of trying to give their children the opportunity to compete equitably, including wanting kids to avoid sustaining injuries while playing against bigger, stronger players.

"They need to look at fairness across the board," said Mr. Fischer. "I don't believe in coddling kids, but the kids are just not getting the same opportunities."

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