

MIDDLE LEVEL INTERSCHOLASTIC SPORTS PROGRAMS

In support of *This We Believe* characteristic:

- School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety

Introduction

What is the proper role of middle level interscholastic sports competition? This continues to be a perplexing question for administrators and other stakeholders who are responsible for the health and safety of young adolescents who participate in these sports. *This We Believe* (2003) states that “intramural and extracurricular activities that require physical activity must be developmentally appropriate, be open to the entire student body, and comply with recognized national standards” (p. 32). However, there is much evidence that demonstrates the reality that many middle level interscholastic sports programs fall short of meeting these criteria (McEwin & Swaim, 2007).

Providing all young adolescents with opportunities to participate, build their skill levels, and experience the positive outcomes that can result from well-planned sports programs is a high priority in developmentally responsive sports programs. This also means, however, that there is less emphasis placed on win-loss records and producing championship teams. Emphasis on more inclusive and safer practices often leads to changes (e.g., rule changes, less playing time for elite athletes, no-cut policies, and fewer sports competitions each season) that are controversial among parents, sports fans, coaches, and others.

Even middle level schools that have made significant gains in creating and implementing other aspects of developmentally responsive programs and practices have typically avoided the controversy that accompanies making middle level sports programs responsive to the characteristics, needs, and interests of young adolescents (McEwin & Swaim, 2007). In many cases, the appropriateness of middle level interscholastic sports has not even been examined because of a prevailing assumption that traditional sports programs serve the age group well. Although it is often understood that significant changes are needed to make the interscholastic sports programs more developmentally appropriate, stakeholders back away from advocating for these changes for fear of being unpopular with parents of successful athletics and anticipated criticism from community members, coaches, and the press. However, there are also those who believe that interscholastic sports programs should be developmentally responsive and stand ready to make the changes needed to provide all young adolescents with opportunities to

participate in school-sponsored sports programs that are inclusive, safe, and enjoyable.

Summary of Research

Interscholastic sports programs, in which schools compete with other schools in league or conference settings, have been established at the vast majority of middle schools. The percentage of middle schools offering interscholastic sports programs has increased from 50% in 1968, to 77% in 1993, to 96% in 2003 (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 2003; McEwin & Swaim, 2007). However, a national survey conducted in 2000 found a dramatic decline in the percentage of middle schools offering intramural sports programs, those typically organized to allow wide participation and do not include competition with other schools, (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2002). A national study of middle school sports programs conducted in 2003 revealed that only 58% of middle schools had intramural sports programs (McEwin & Swaim). This trend in decreasing percentages of middle schools providing intramural opportunities is disturbing, considering the importance of the physical well being of all young adolescents.

There is widespread belief that participation in interscholastic sports offers many advantages for young adolescents. However, research showing increases in injury rates, concerns about psychological stress, instances of unqualified adult leadership, and high attrition rates in middle level sports programs has raised issues that need to be addressed (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002; Cary, 2004; Centers for Disease Control, 2002; Coakley, 1987; Engh, 2002; Gerdy, 2002; Mac, 1998; McEwin & Swaim, 2007, 2008; Noonan, 2003; Swaim & McEwin, 2005). One concern is the long-term psychological effects of cutting young adolescents from teams on which they would like to participate. This elimination is based on factors beyond the control of those wishing to participate (e.g., maturational differences, capricious nature of coaches' judgments). Eliminating young adolescents from teams denies them opportunities to learn new skills, to build confidence in their abilities, and to develop positive interactions with their peers. One result of this cutting process is that many young adolescents drop out of all future sports participation (McEwin & Dickinson, 1998; Ogilvie, 1988). For this and other reasons, the National Association of Sport and



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Physical Education (2002) has recommended no-cut policies be adopted. There is evidence that some middle schools do have policies that prevent cuts from competitive sports. McEwin and Swaim (2007) found that the majority of middle schools responding to their 2003 national survey had no-cut policies in some sports (56%), with 10% of the schools having no-cut policies in all sports.

Many positive benefits for young adolescents can result from participation in competitive sports programs. However, when young adolescent needs and interests become secondary to pressures and unreasonable expectations from coaches, parents, the community, and even themselves, participation often has the opposite effect. Young adolescents' psychological, as well as physical, well-being should be a priority in developing middle level sports programs (Darst & Pangrazi, 2002; McEwin & Dickinson, 1997; National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2002; Patel, 2001). The focus of middle level competitive sports should be on helping young adolescents set goals that reflect their current interests and abilities. This makes it easier for them to emphasize improvement instead of the highly competitive aspects of sports that frequently pit one athlete against another (McEwin & Swaim, 2007).

Middle level sports programs that are developmentally inappropriate deserve attention, because the health and welfare of young adolescents are at stake. Those in decision-making positions need to make difficult and courageous decisions regarding the sports offered and the conditions of these sports. Middle level interscholastic sports programs are neither inherently good nor inherently bad. The quality of these programs makes the difference. There are many actions that can be taken to help ensure that middle level sports programs are as safe as possible and developmentally responsive (e.g., quality coaching, maintaining proper competitive environments, improved supervision). Adults who have the responsibility for middle school programs can and should take the necessary steps to make participation in intramural and interscholastic sports developmentally responsive for young adolescents (McEwin & Swaim, 2007; *Sports Done Right*, 2005).

Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided as beginning points for consideration. More detailed recommendations can be found in *Clearing the Hurdles: Issues and Answers in Middle School Sports* (McEwin & Swaim 2007).

Recommendation 1: Develop a clearly stated, developmentally re-sponsive sports philosophy for all middle level sports programs. Middle 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 involved

needed direction for making the many decisions they face on a daily basis.

Recommendation 2: Offer sports programs that include intramural and interscholastic sports, both with a high priority. Sports programs should provide opportunities for all young adolescents to participate in some sports activities, regardless of their stage of physical development, size, exceptionality, gender, ethnicity, or any of the other differences that characterize the age group.

Recommendation 3: Operate sports programs in ways that maximize enjoyment for participants. Sports programs should not be so competitive that participants experience undue stress. When stress levels become too high, and only a select few young adolescents dominate playing time, many participants permanently drop out of all sports participation. The emphasis in middle level sports programs should be placed on enhancing self-esteem and developing social and physical skills within reasonably competitive environments.

Recommendation 4: Establish clearly articulated and equitable eligibility policies that support the school's commitment to academics. While teachers and coaches want students to be successful in classrooms as well as on the athletic fields, the academic performance of individuals frequently becomes a problem requiring carefully planned and widely understood eligibility policies. Student athletes who become ineligible should be provided assistance from adults in regaining their eligibility rather than having to struggle to become eligible on their own.

Recommendation 5: Middle level sports programs should be organized and administered in ways that encourage young adolescents to explore multiple sports rather than specialize in one sport to the exclusion of others. Young adolescents are at an ideal time in their development to explore different sports and select the ones they are most successful in and enjoy the most. Early and intense specialization in one sport often leads to overuse injuries and contributes to middle level athletes becoming burned out on sports participation (Metzl, 2002).

Recommendation 6: Employ middle level coaches who are knowledgeable about the nature of developmentally responsive middle school sports programs and committed to implementing them. Middle level coaches should be knowledgeable about the sports they coach as well as the implications of those sports for working with young adolescents. Middle level coaches should always place the welfare of young adolescents above all other considerations, including their win-loss records.

Recommendation 7: Assign a top priority to making middle school sports programs as safe as possible. The most dangerous time for youth to participate in competitive interscholastic sports is the middle school years as evidenced by increases in their injury rates and psychological stress. McEwin and Swaim (2007) suggested the following steps to make sports



participation safer and more rewarding for young adolescents: (a) step-up adult supervision of all middle level sports activities; (b) establish clear and high standards for hiring and retaining middle level coaches; (c) mount community-wide campaigns to educate parents and communities about safe and developmentally responsive sports programs; (d) ensure that safe equipment is used and that playing fields and other facilities are safe and well-maintained; (e) require that all participants undergo full physical examinations before a season begins; (f) make careful, data-based decisions about which sports to include in the interscholastic sports program; (g) modify rules for playing sports to reduce injuries; and (g) implement high-quality intramural sports programs that are inclusive and designed for wide, safe participation (pp. 96–97).

Recommendation 8: Make extensive efforts to help parents understand productive and appropriate ways they can be involved in supporting their children in middle level sports programs. Middle level sports programs can provide positive ways for parents and other family members to be involved in meaningful activities. Orientation meetings, well-designed 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 in middle level sports programs.

Recommendation 9: Establish rules governing middle school sports that will ensure the widest possible degree of participation by all team members. Too frequently, middle level sports rules have been heavily influenced by senior high sports programs. The difficulty with this practice is that the rules and regulations that come from senior high schools are designed for use with older athletes and are inappropriate for young adolescents. Middle level sports programs need their own rules and regulations based on the developmental realities of this age group.

Recommendation 10: Provide adequate and equitably balanced human and financial resources for all phases of middle level sports activities. Both intramural and interscholastic sports programs should have a high priority. This means that disproportionate amounts of human and financial resources should not be allotted to the interscholastic sports program while intramural sports struggle for adequate resources. The implications of this recommendation for the requirements of Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972, which prohibits discrimination based on sex, should also be considered.

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