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Pay-to-play sports keeping lower-income kids out of the game

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In an era of tight funding, school districts across the country are cutting their athletic budgets. Many schools are implementing athletic participation fees to cover the cost of school sports. But those fees have forced kids in lower-income families to the sidelines, according to a new poll that found nearly one in five lower-income parents report their children are participating less in school sports.

The University of Michigan C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health recently asked parents of middle- and high-school-age children nationwide about participation and cost of school sports.

Overall, 61 percent of children playing middle or high school sports were charged a pay-to-play fee. The average fee was $93, according to the poll respondents, but 21% of children faced a pay-to-play fee of $150 or more.

However, pay-to-play fees are only one component of the school sports costs reported by parents. Including equipment, uniforms and additional team fees,, the average cost for a child's sports participation was $381.

Researchers found that 12 percent of parents overall said that the cost of school sports caused a drop in participation for at least one of their children. However, that varied substantially based on income. Among lower-income families, those earning less than $60,000 per year, 19 percent said their children's participation decreased because of costs. But among families earning more than $60,000 per year, only 5 percent

reported costs had caused their children to participate less.

"As pay-to-play becomes the norm, nearly 1 in 5 lower-income parents reported their kids decreased their sports participation – that's significant," says Sarah Clark, M.P.H., Associate Director of the Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Unit at the University of Michigan and Associate Director of the National Poll on Children's Health.

The poll found only 6 percent of participants received a waiver of pay-to-play fees. Perhaps, Clark says, schools need to look at their waiver policies and consider options like partial waivers, installment payments, or other means to provide flexibility for families. .

"We know that participating in school sports offers many benefits to children and teens: higher school achievement, lower dropout rates, improved health, reduced obesity and the development of skills like teamwork and problem-solving," says Clark.

"There's not an athletic director, school administrator or coach out there who doesn't want every kid to have a chance to participate. But there are no easy answers, especially because budgets are expected to get tighter and tighter."

Each year millions of children and teens play competitive sports through their middle and high schools. Clark says she hopes these data can help spur conversation among school officials about how to make sure children in lower-income families are not left out.

More information: Full report: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health

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