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## Frankfort non-profit seeks to help student athletes pay their fees

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A new Franklin County non-profit that helps students with the cost of playing on public school sports teams wants to be a model for other communities.

"We would like to see this go beyond Franklin County," said founder Rob Hecker, who is planning the Beat the Heat 5K Fun Run on Aug. 13 as a fund-raiser.

The mission of We Wanna Play, which was organized last year, is "to make sure every student athlete who wishes to participate in middle or high school varsity sports has that opportunity and is not held back by the escalating costs."

It's typical for kids playing sports at any of Franklin County's high schools or middle schools to pay between \$35 and \$300 in fees, Hecker said.

He was well acquainted with the county's sporting landscape. His two sons played team sports at Bondurant Middle School. His youngest son, Cody, graduated from Western Hills in 2010 and had played football, baseball and basketball. An older son, Shane, graduated from Western Hills in 2006 and played baseball.

Hecker also was familiar with fund-raising. For 14 years, he'd organized the Black Cat Scramble golf tournament at Longview Golf Course to benefit his son's sports teams. After his last son left school, Hecker wanted to diversify his efforts.

And he saw a need.

Over the years, as districts have been pressured to reduce costs, athletic budgets have been cut, Western

Hills principal Rita Rector said. In turn, she said, booster organizations have had to become more responsible for expenses including field maintenance, and that resulted in fewer resources to help kids.

"We don't have a lot of flexibility in our funding," she said.

There is no villain in the scenario, Hecker said. Every group is trying its best in difficult financial times, he said.

But the rising costs set up an environment in which some kids didn't even try out to become part of a team because they knew their families could not afford it.

District statistics show that about half of the county's students qualify for free or reduced lunch because of low family incomes, he said. Yet only about 18 percent of all students play on high school and middle school sports teams.

But it's not just about what happens on the field, said Rob Sturgill, a board member of We Wanna Play. Sports offer kids a chance to be a part of a bigger community, and because grades must be kept up to remain on a team, participation can help with academics.

There's something intangible about the benefit of sports, said Sturgill, who saw what a difference it made at his small private school in Eastern Kentucky when team sports were added.

Last spring, money from the golf scramble was distributed to help 32 students at Franklin's three high schools who played baseball or softball.

Because of confidentiality restraints, the non-profit's board doesn't know the names of the children. A school official gives the sports team's roster to an employee who has access to a listing of students receiving free or reduced lunch. That employee passes on the number of eligible students to the non-profit. The money is distributed by the school.

Rector likes that the arrangement helps the kids while protecting their privacy, she said. She hasn't heard much from the kids, she said, "But I have heard from a lot of grateful parents."

"These guys are great," she said of Hecker and his crew.

Hecker knows his program is starting out small, but he has big plans. He hopes to slowly expand through other spring sports and into the middle schools. Ideally, he'd like to live up the group's mission of helping any student athlete who qualifies.

Community support has been great so far, he said, with the group depending on word of mouth to encourage people to help with fund-raising and let students know help is available.

But the idea of the program, which as far as he can tell is unlike any in the country, has caught on. He said he already has been contacted by people in other counties intrigued by the ideas.

With a smile, he said that he'd even be willing to help athletics arch-rival Woodford County start something similar.

He understands that for many families, even a small fee can be too high.

"That's where we are coming from," he said. "We are saying we just want to ease the burden."

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