

What separates the haves and the have-nots of high-school athletics — and Washington's plan to fix it

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Updated January 19, 2019 at 2:43 pm



(Illustration by Rich Boudet / The Seattle Times)

The competition gap is widening in high-school athletics, but the problem is bigger than high-school sports. The WIAA believes it has found a socioeconomic factor that can help level the playing field.

Before every school year, George Foster holds a meeting with all of the coaches at Rainier Beach High School. It's pretty standard stuff, the Vikings' athletic director says, with one exception.

"You know our athletic department doesn't have any money," he tells

them. "So if you want anything, you're going to have to fundraise yourself."

Rainier Beach is situated in one of Seattle's least wealthy, most diverse neighborhoods, where census data shows people of color make up three-quarters of the population, compared to one-third citywide. It's hung five state championship banners in the last decade and bred a dozen professional athletes since the 1980s. You could fill an NBA starting five with its alumni — or at least one heck of a backcourt. It's also in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, where the median income — \$34,745, according to the latest census data — is less than half that of the average Seattle household.

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How is free and reduced-cost lunch eligibility determined?

One-child households with an annual income of \$15,782 or less qualify for free lunches. For each additional child, the income level to qualify raises by \$5,616. To qualify for reduced-cost lunches, a one-child household must make \$22,459 or less, increasing by \$7,992 for each additional child.

Source: 2018-19 USDA Child Nutrition Program Income Guidelines

But the number the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association, the state's governing body for high-school athletics, is interested in is 69.8. That's the percentage of Rainier Beach's 736 students who qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches, a common proxy measure for poverty. It's the highest number in the Metro League and 26 points above the state average of 43 percent.

Over the past decade, four of every five public schools that won state titles resided below that 43 percent figure. The average for championship teams was 30 percent — 13 points below the state average.

Statewide, almost all high-school championships are won by students at wealthier, whiter schools. And the barriers to competition are increasing at ever earlier ages for low-income communities.

The WIAA believes it has found a socioeconomic factor that can help level the playing field.

Under a [new proposal](#), that 69.8 number would be used as a type of offset against the school's enrollment. In this case, it would mean a 26-percent reduction in the enrollment figure used to determine whether the school plays at Class 4A, 3A, 2A and so on. For every

percentage point more than 10 points above 43 percent stage average, the same is deducted from its enrollment number, potentially making lower-income schools more competitive by allowing them to compete against smaller schools at lower levels.

“You can see it does have an impact on success,” says Mike Colbrese, the WIAA’s retiring executive director. “We’re trying to close this gap on success so that we don’t have a have and have-not (situation) slipping into high-school sports. Because nobody likes to be in that situation.”

[[MORE: How the WIAA settled on free and reduced-cost lunches »](#)]

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What’s unusual about Rainier Beach isn’t its economic standing, but its athletic achievement despite it. Still, Foster feels the stark inequalities firsthand.

When meeting with his coaches, that “anything” they might request can range from new uniforms, more assistant coaches, even fielding an entire freshman baseball team. Stuff many schools — especially those with the athletic prowess of Rainier Beach — receive from their booster clubs, whose budgets in Washington’s most affluent schools can reach seven figures.

But Rainier Beach? “To tell you the truth, we really don’t have a booster club,” Foster says. So when Gerald Smiley was hired as baseball coach in 2015, he [took it upon himself to start a GoFundMe](#) account to raise \$42,000 to revitalize the program. The problem? It was nearly impossible to track how it was spent, and

Seattle Public Schools soon banned GoFundMe as a fundraising option. Smiley [resigned after one season](#).

Compare that to Glacier Peak, a public high school in the more affluent suburban hills overlooking the Snohomish valley. When budget cuts were going to mean cutting the Grizzlies' freshman baseball team, baseball coach and one-time athletic director Bob Blair turned to his booster club. They agreed to foot the annual \$2,000-3,000 bill. Now, as Blair observes other programs struggle with turnout, he says he hasn't seen it at his school.

"The excuses (other coaches) are giving me, they exist here, but it's not happening," Blair says. "I think the boosters and having a freshman program is a big part of that. Kids come in here knowing 'I might be 14 years old, five feet tall and weigh 100 pounds, but ... won't get cut because I'm a scrawny little kid as a freshman.' "

Only 9.7 percent of Glacier Peak's students are eligible for free and reduced-cost lunches, one of 16 public schools in the state under 10 percent. Under the free and reduced-cost lunch proposal as [originally drafted](#), Glacier Peak and other affluent schools would have seen their enrollment number increase by the percentage they are below the state average of free and reduced-cost lunches. Private schools, too. But those rules didn't make it to the final proposal, which will only look at those above the average.

According to data analysis by the Times, private schools have won 25 percent of all state titles over the past decade, while private schools enroll only 7.3 percent all the state's students. Of the public schools to win championships, four out of five have had fewer kids eligible for

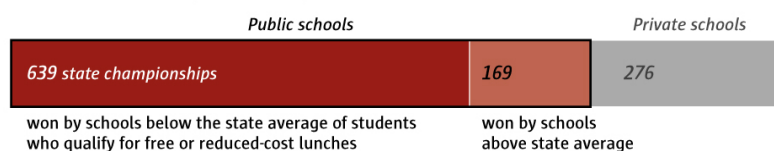
free and reduced-cost lunches than the state average of 43 percent. The average champion's percentage of free and reduced-cost lunches is 13 points below the state average. Who owns the most titles at the state's top two classifications over the past decade? Mercer Island (26, 2.9%), Bellevue (22, 8%) and Skyline (16, 3.2%).

Many of these come in sports other schools aren't even able to compete in, such as golf, tennis, swimming and diving — country-club sports. Others from sports that require such specialized training or facilities, it's difficult to keep up without.

Who's winning state championships?

Of the 1,084 state titles won over the past decade, a quarter have been won by private schools. But of the winning public schools, most of the titles have been won by schools with free and reduced-price lunch rates below the state average.

STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS (PAST 10 YEARS)



Source: Washington Interscholastic Activities Association

EMILY M. ENG / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Before he was the athletic director at Glacier Peak, Blair was O'Dea's baseball coach, where he won the Class 3A state title in 2005 (and the Fighting Irish have won three more since Blair's departure).

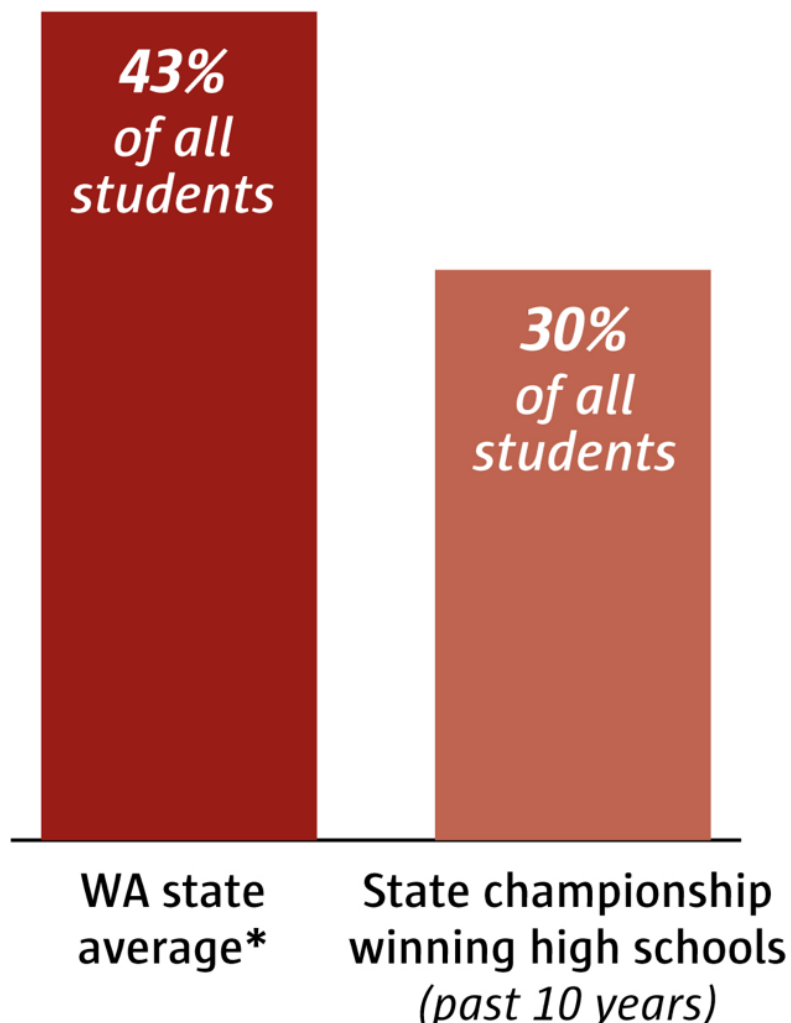
The level of parent involvement he sees at suburban Glacier Peak tops even O'Dea, a private Metro League school located on Seattle's First Hill. But the Fighting Irish have their own advantages, like a booster-funded project to transform a gymnasium into a suitable indoor baseball practice facility, replete with roll-out turf, pull-out batting cages and a portable pitching mound.

State champions

vs. state average

Overall, 43 percent of Washington students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches. But at schools that win state championships, the number is lower.

STUDENTS QUALIFYING FOR FREE OR REDUCED-COST LUNCHES



**Based on all grade levels*

*Sources: Washington Interscholastic
Activities Association,
Seattle Times analysis*

EMILY M. ENG / THE SEATTLE TIMES

“So whenever it rained, there was turf we’d roll out,” Blair says. “Turf we could take ground balls on. We had an entire indoor facility that could be utilized. Other schools might not have that. They’re fielding tennis balls inside an auxiliary gym somewhere. It’s just not the same.”

Beyond school grounds, many parents turn to private instruction for their children, particularly valuable in what Blair calls “repetition-based” sports such as baseball, softball, golf and tennis — another area where more affluent schools begin to separate themselves. Those sports are where Blair believes the new rule could have its largest impact.

“It’s that next level of players,” Blair says, “that ‘B’ group, who would be average without private coaching, but private coaching takes them up a little above average, not quite to the elite level but to above average.

“And when you get that group to move from average to above average, that’s where the suburban schools and the more affluent schools have the advantage over other situations.”

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New WIAA classifications

A new proposal would return the WIAA to hard-capped classifications

4A 1,300+ adjusted enrollment

3A 900-1,299

2A 450-899

1A 225-449

2B 105-224

1B <105

No classification system is perfect, Colbrese warns. He should know — in his 23 years leading the WIAA, this would be the fifth time it's been altered. But this is the first time the state's governing body has taken a socioeconomic factor into account. If the WIAA's Representative Assembly votes to approve it Jan. 28, Washington would become the 22nd state to implement a classification modifier in hopes of restoring competitive balance.

"We have to be, I think, for a state association to be more intentional," Colbrese says, in looking at the barriers to participation for low-income communities.

Such barriers can begin as early as 6 years old and include participation fees, transportation and the proliferation of club and travel teams, which can be expensive, hypercompetitive and a time commitment not affordable to many. A University of Michigan study found one-fifth of families making less than \$60,000 to report a drop in participation cited cost as the reason, compared to one-twentieth of

those above that threshold.

The Aspen Institute, which every year conducts a national “State of Play” survey with the goal of increasing access to youth sports, reports growing participation overall but a drop among households with incomes below \$50,000, particularly precipitous among those making less than \$25,000. Only 34 percent of children from those households played at least one team sport in 2017, while 56.5 percent did overall — and 69 percent of kids in households making at least \$100,000.

“The gap between haves and have nots has widened over time,” says Tom Farrey, an executive director at The Aspen Institute. (Farrey was an investigative sports reporter for The Seattle Times in the 1990s.)

“There’s just been a general privatization of sport and recreation over the past generation and increasingly over the past 10 or so years,” he says. “It is driven by the creation of these travel teams, these club teams at ever earlier ages.”

By the time kids reach high school, the so-called haves and have-nots are almost predetermined, sifted out by the system one way or another. It’s not the elite athletes who are lost in the shuffle, but rather those who aren’t as naturally gifted, who might turn to the next best thing, something easier or less expensive.

As Blair, the Glacier Peak baseball coach, puts it: “Some schools that don’t have the social continuity ... just going to school in a lot of circumstances is important enough. Participating in other activities, that becomes secondary.”

It will take more than a new set of rules to reach equilibrium. Colbrese and the WIAA know this, and Farrey has made it his life's work. Since founding the Aspen Institute's sports and society program, Farrey has taken his "State of Play" studies to six communities around the country, where his team partners with local organizations to issue a localized version of their annual national report. This year, the Aspen Institute is partnering with the University of Washington, King County Parks and other local organizations to release a King County-specific report, expected to be released in September.

Ultimately, the WIAA is only a private, nonprofit governing body for state high-school sports. It's taken on a societal problem. To really solve anything, they need more money, Colbrese says.

While the WIAA searches for solutions at the high-school level, it falls on local communities to open the pipeline from youth sports to high school.

From more green spaces in Buffalo and Detroit to delaying soccer travel teams for grade schoolers in Cambridge, Mass., Farrey says his group has found effective solutions in communities around the country.

One Washington state representative, Steve Bergquist, is working on legislation that would waive athletic fees for students who qualify for free and reduced-cost lunches.

Other states, such as Oregon, have honed in on competitive balance. The Oregon School Activities Association (OSAA), that state's equivalent of the WIAA, also uses the number of free and reduced-cost lunches, but it looks at on-field performance, too — even moving

30 teams down in football just last year. That's a no-go in Washington, Colbrese says, where leagues carry more prestige than in other states.

Peter Weber, executive director of the OSAA, says his state's attempts to even the high-school playing field with classification modifiers has shown success. But each state needs to find its own solution — as Weber says, "ideas don't travel across the border too well."

And, as the competitive gap widens, more and more states are trying.

"On some level, it's inevitable what (the WIAA is) doing here," Farrey says. "And it mirrors the fact that the country has sorted into economic have and have nots. ... I would say this proposal reflects the shift in youth sports in America, the sorting of sport have and have nots."