

Iowa high school sports: Should poverty be used as a measurement of fairness in determining opponents?

[Cody Goodwin](#) | Des Moines Register Updated 13 hours ago



Hoover outlasts North in final two minutes of postponed game

Dalton Davis, a senior for D.M. Hoover, talks after the Huskies beat North for their first win of the 2018 season.

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Dalton Davis
DM Hoover senior

Tom Mihalovich picks up the phone one evening and tells a rare story. The lifelong south-sider spent 12 years as the head football coach at Des Moines Lincoln, and on this day, he is recalling a game from more than a decade ago.

That night, Aug. 28, 2008, the Railsplitters beat Urbandale 13-12. Lincoln rushed for 197 yards and overcame three fumbles. Quarterback Marcus Walczyk scored the game-winning touchdown with 2 minutes, 14 seconds left in the fourth quarter.

"Then the defense held. We were fortunate to come out on top," said Mihalovich, who coached Lincoln from 2001-12. "It was a good time for us."

It was also the last time a Des Moines city school beat one of its suburban Polk County counterparts in football.

And it's one reason why the Des Moines School Board last month asked the Iowa High School Athletic Association and the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union to consider changing the Iowa high school sports classification structure.

Currently, both governing bodies use enrollment to create athletic program divisions, but the board believes other variables — socioeconomic status, chief among them — should be factored in.

"There's ample and steadily mounting evidence that other (considerations) should be added to the formula in the interests of balanced competition and athlete safety," DMPS officials wrote in a release on June 20 announcing the resolution.

"... The goal is not to guarantee hollow victory. It's to ensure a sporting chance versus commensurate opponents and offer a more enriching experience."

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By the numbers: 'A lot has changed'

The long-standing struggles of the city school football programs are behind the board's request.

Since 2009, the five DMPS high schools — East, Hoover, Lincoln, North and Roosevelt — are a combined 0-102 against the other large-class high schools in Polk County: Ankeny, Ankeny Centennial, Johnston, Southeast Polk, Urbandale, West Des Moines Valley and Dowling Catholic, a private school. The average score of those games

is 50-10.

Add in Dallas County's Waukee, another regular opponent of the city schools, and that record balloons to 0-112, and the average score still at 49-10.

What's more, the overall record of the DMPS high schools is 147-316 in that same span, with 88 of those wins (59.9%) coming against another DMPS high school.

"At first glance, how many students you have is a natural way to determine how to classify," Phil Roeder, director of communications and public affairs at DMPS, told the Register. "But a lot has changed since that system was installed decades ago, the biggest being issues around poverty and socioeconomic makeup of our schools.

"It's more than just bad players or bad coaching. To us, it's a systemic issue that's causing our schools and other schools with similar makeups in Iowa to essentially have zero odds of winning when facing schools that have more experience and resources in some sports."

A leading indicator of assessing the socioeconomic makeup of schools is the number of students eligible for free-and-reduced-priced lunch.

In 2018-19, the statewide average was 43 percent, according to statistics provided by the Iowa Department of Education. The district-wide average for DMPS was well above that mark, at 77.7 percent.

Comparatively, their seven Polk County suburban equivalents all reported under the state average.

DMPS leaned on these numbers when asking the boys' association and girls' union to consider more than just enrollment in sports classification.

"DMPS students are more likely to choose work as an afterschool (sic) activity than athletics, out of economic necessity," DMPS officials wrote in the release that announced the resolution. "Recruiting sufficient numbers to field competitive teams is more of a challenge in underprivileged districts where losing is the expected outcome than it is in ones where championships are traditional and even being a third-stringer carries status."

Beyond football, however, many DMPS athletic programs have found varying levels of success over the past decade.

To name a few:

- [Hoover softball won a state title last summer.](#)
- [North boys' basketball qualified for state in 2017.](#)
- [Roosevelt's Willis Gaer won the 2016 Class 4A state golf title.](#)
- East's wrestling team had four individuals in the top five of their respective weights at the 2019 state tournament.
- Lincoln football is 47-47 overall since 2009.

MORE: [Des Moines Hoover softball named 2018-19 All-Iowa team of the year](#)

Roeder acknowledged that football is the "most glaring example." No DMPS high school has won a state football title under the IHSAA. Only six schools have won large-class state football titles in the past 20 years, including Ankeny (once), Valley (five times), and Dowling (nine,

including each of the past six).

"I would encourage them to look at this for all sports," added Matt Carver, the legal services director for School Administrators of Iowa. "It might vary from sport to sport on some level, but why not?"

'Ultimately, it's not up to us'

As many as 21 state athletic associations use models that take more than just enrollment into account for sports classification. Multipliers and success rates/factors are both common, but others use socioeconomic status as part of a reverse multiplier system.

The Washington Interscholastic Activities Association recently voted in a proposal to use raw enrollment numbers, but any school that's above the statewide average of free-and-reduced-priced-lunch can use that percentage to shrink its enrollment number for the formula.

[Washington's free-and-reduced-priced-lunch average is 43%](#), according to the Seattle Times, so a school at 44% could drop 1% from its raw enrollment, and so on. Minnesota, Ohio and Oregon have all tried similar methods.

"We think there's interest in this," Roeder said. "There's a growing discussion, so we wanted to join that conversation. We're the largest school district in Iowa, so we feel we have a voice to share. We hope to find a solution that makes sense for everybody in the state.

"Ultimately, it's not up to us. It's up to the association and the union, and we encourage them to cast a wide net and see what other states are doing, and look at what might be applicable to Iowa moving

forward.”

Dan Sabers, the longtime football coach at Iowa City High, has his own idea. His proposition came to light in a [Cedar Rapids Gazette article](#) in late May:

- Using a formula based on enrollment, socioeconomics, and recent success, create eight football classes, the largest having 16 teams
- Eight would come from central Iowa (Ankeny, Ankeny Centennial, Dowling, Johnston, Southeast Polk, Valley, Waukee, then either Ames or Urbandale);
- Eight would come from the rest of the state (Bettendorf, Cedar Falls, City High, Kennedy, Iowa City West, Pleasant Valley, Xavier, then either Cedar Rapids Prairie or Linn-Mar).

Sabers constructed his template after seeing the Oklahoma Secondary School Activities Association's example. There, the 32 largest schools are in 6A, then the next 32 largest are in 5A. The remaining classes are divided up equally, depending on the sport, and can fluctuate yearly based on a formula.

Schools would be bumped up a class if they meet any of these criteria:

- The ability to decline admission
- A location within 15 miles of a 6A or 5A school
- Fewer than 25% of students eligible for free- or reduced-priced lunch
- A jump in enrollment by 50% over a three-year span

“It may not be simple, and I don't claim to have all the answers, but I'm glad we're talking about it,” Sabers said. “That was my main goal, to

advance the discussion, because enrollment, by itself, is just not working.

"We may not get it right, but I'd like to see us get better."

The first step toward any change could come this September.

In 2008, the association created a classification committee to study the issue and recommend possible changes to its Board of Control. The committee is made up of association board members, superintendents, principals and athletic directors from public and non-public schools, large and small. (The girls' union does not have a similar committee.)

The committee meets every two years, and the coming assembly this fall is expected to include a substantial conversation regarding sport classification. Everything is on the table, from multipliers to success factors, open enrollment, socioeconomics, adding classes and more.

"There's an appetite to see some change happen," said Chris Cuellar, the association's communications director. "There are many informed people spitballing ideas and sending them to us. That's all good.

"But there're no two states that have the same model. There's no perfect system out there."

'It's like the big 4A club'

Mihalovich finds the whole discussion baffling.

Although he no longer coaches in high school — he was dismissed in 2012 after a DMPS investigation concluded he violated policies for

bullying, harassment and corporal punishment — he believes the city school football programs can succeed with hard work.

There isn't a reverse multiplier in real life, he said.

"I don't believe in lowering the bar," Mihalovich continued. "Recruit your halls. Fundraise. We expanded our camps, from junior high all the way down to first grade. I wanted those kids in Lincoln shirts. We embraced the community the way small towns do.

"I saw Sabers' proposal, and it's like a big 4A club. It's like hosting a big dinner at your house, and all the rest of these guys are at the kiddie table. I don't know. That's ugly."

One current DMPS football coach — Mitchell Moore, a former Iowa State staffer who coached Greene County before getting hired at Roosevelt — agreed.

"I don't necessarily applaud what the DMPS did," he said. "I'm only speaking from a Roosevelt football standpoint, but I was never asked about their decision. We need to provide our kids with better facilities and support rather than blaming it on socioeconomic and upbringing. We know the mountain we're trying to climb. We want to be the team that bucks the trend.

"Go up to Iowa State and look at the socioeconomic backgrounds of that roster. Those kids are from all over the country, and I'll bet a good amount qualified for free and reduced lunch. Does that mean they don't have discipline? That they're not smart? That they don't know how to be on time? No. Those traits don't depend on whether you're rich or poor. Those are taught.

"I think we can all look in the mirror and understand that this isn't about athletic ability, but more about accountability and consistency. Everybody has their opinion. Mine is that you develop your kids."

Cody Goodwin covers wrestling and high school sports for the Des Moines Register. Follow him on Twitter at @codygoodwin.

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