

# Exploring the Reclassification Process in State Associations

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Aside from the fundamental charge to provide interscholastic activity programs, arguably the most important duty of a state high school association is to devise and maintain an equitable competitive structure for its member schools. Carrying out this task over more than a century has resulted in the foundation of terms such as "class," "conference," "division," "section" and others that, by now, are engrained in the vocabularies of administrators, coaches, students and parents alike.

To keep the proverbial playing field level, however, the placement of schools and individual sports teams within a state's multitiered classification system must be regularly re-evaluated. That process is known as reclassification, and while its primary objectives are essentially the same in each association, methodologies vary significantly, as states have incorporated a number of different factors tailored to their unique circumstances. This article will take a closer look at some of the more notable reclassification ingredients seen around the country.

Most associations simply rely on current high school enrollment data, but since the Wyoming High School Activities Association (WHSAA) conducts its process one year before changes become active and can be greatly affected by fluctuating rural populations, it uses an Average Daily Membership (ADM) marker that dips below the secondary school level for a more accurate enrollment forecast.

To determine schools' ADM ratings, the WHSAA takes an average of two single-year projections provided by the Wyoming Department of Education (WDE), with Year 1 reflecting school districts' numbers in grades 7-10, and Year 2 representing the count for grades 6-9.

As an example, during the WHSAA's most recent reclassification meetings, WDE slated Casper Kelly Walsh High School – the largest school in the state – for a 2022-23 enrollment of 1,988.44 (students in grades 7-10 in September 2021) and a 2023-24 enrollment of 2,003.91 (grades 6-9). The mid-point of those numbers, 1,996.17, was used as Kelly Walsh's official WHSAA value.

But the true impact of the formula shows up in the middle sections of Wyoming's enrollment list, where it can decide the sorting of schools like Lyman High School and Lovell High School. The state's most recent report shows Lyman with a first-year enrollment of 228.28 and Lovell a 238.75. Conversely, the second-year numbers have Lyman at 232.31 and Lovell at 219.61. Using the averages, Lyman's overall ADM figure of 230.29 slots in slightly ahead of Lovell's 229.18, presenting a minute – but potentially meaningful – adjustment depending on classification cutoff points.

"Before (instituting ADM), we would just take the kids that were in high school (in the current) year, and by the time we got into our next reclassification cycle, those juniors and seniors were gone and we weren't even close with a lot of our numbers," said Ron Laird, WHSAA commissioner. "(With ADM), I'll go back and check our projection against how many kids those schools actually had for their enrollment, and there'll be a school here or there that we might be 15 percent off, but we got several of them that were one student, or even a half of a student off. So, it's not perfect, but it's working as well as it can."

As one might imagine, the other major challenge in Wyoming – a state with just 70 high schools spread out over nearly 100,000 square miles – is balancing groupings that are sensible from both a competitive and geographical standpoint.

Laird said that there is no one system that portrays a perfect landscape for any sport, as previous classes built on geography were notorious for mismatch blowouts, and the current setup can see some schools drive as many as five, six and even seven hours, one way, to play similar opponents. Splitting each classification equally into East/West or North/South conferences (mostly East/ West) counteracts some of the angst over travel but can also present additional complications when it comes time for state tournaments.

"We'll get into some issues because our three biggest communities are all on the east side," Laird said. "The way our structure is, we have the top four schools on each side go to (the state tournament) out of regionals, so, depending on the year, people will argue that we don't always have our best teams at state. But it's just something we have to deal with, and it's a challenge for sure."

Colleen Maguire, executive director of the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA), faces the opposite of Laird's predicament in a state known for being the national leader in population density.

Contrary to most states that use "classes" as their primary term for enrollment-based configuration, the NJSIAA organizes its members into "groups." Within the groups, schools are then separated into proximity-driven "sections" that set the table for postseason play and currently range in size from single digits up to 31 schools based on

those participating for each sport.

"I think our system is beneficial because it provides some geography for those preliminary rounds, especially in sports like basketball that have fast-paced tournaments," said Maguire, who recently completed her first reclassification process as NJSIAA executive director this past summer. "With the sections, in those types of team sports where kids are playing every other day or every third day, schools are not doing large-scale statewide travel in those first few rounds of their tournaments, and I think they appreciate that."

With sizable portions of two major metropolitan areas, 435 schools and an estimated 324,000 students crammed into just 8,723 square miles, carving out NJSIAA sectional boundary lines may seem like a daunting task. But with the help of its aptly named "northing number" software, a program that assigns each member school a specific value based on its distance from the equator, the association is able to formulate its maps with pinpoint accuracy.

Schools may need more than one NJSIAA map on hand, however, as the association utilizes a sport-specific model for its classifications. For instance, due to the various levels of school involvement in each sport, Randolph High School competes in the North I section of Group III for cross country, North I of Group IV for boys basketball, North II of Group III for softball, North I of Group III for girls soccer, and North II of Group III for boys soccer.

"It's something that sort of evolved over the last decade or so," said Maguire. "We used to just place schools in one general classification that they used for every sport, but (they) grew frustrated because it created uneven section sizes and unequal opportunity to be in the state

tournament, depending on the sport. So, they wanted to drill down to this sport-specific model because they wanted that balance. They realize though that this is the risk you run – you’re going to have your teams playing in one section for one sport and another section for a different sport, or even different sections for boys and girls teams in the same sport.”

Another characteristic of the NJSIAA's governance is its segregation of public and non-public or “independent” schools for state championship competition, a philosophy it shares with the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association (TSSAA).

While the split concept has existed for almost 90 years in New Jersey – the NJSIAA's first non-public boys basketball and outdoor track and field state championships were held in 1934 – the TSSAA's history with it is much shorter, having initially instituted its “Division II” in the late 1990s.

“The association was split into two groups where you had schools that awarded need based financial aid were placed into a separate division (Division II),” said Mark Reeves, executive director of the TSSAA. “Those schools were exclusively private schools, but there were also a few private schools that elected not to give need based financial aid to athletes, and they were allowed to continue to play in Division I.”

At first, the new structure seemed to be a viable solution to the great debate in the Volunteer State, but as more and more private schools entered the picture, it didn’t take long – just six years, to be exact – before the coals were stoked once again, and again, and several more times after that.

According to an article co-authored by Michael Murphy and Tom Kreager for The Tennessean, a “complete split” between public and private schools was first suggested to the TSSAA legislative council in 2002. When that proposal was struck down by a one vote margin, a private school enrollment multiplier (to be covered in greater detail below) was established in 2004, a move that largely quieted serious discussions on the issue for the next decade.

Then, in 2014, the TSSAA Legislative Council received another official request for total separation, which led to the formation of a special committee tasked with conducting further analysis. The committee returned with a total of five potential solutions involving varying degrees of “splitting,” including an option to keep the status quo.

After another couple years of discussion and weighing each approach forwarded by the committee, the pro-separators finally won out, as the Legislative Council authorized an absolute division of public and private schools in March 2018 to take effect with the 2019-20 school year.

Now three athletic calendars removed from the landmark decision, Reeves believes the association made the right call.

“It’s going really well,” Reeves said. “Quite frankly, when I think about the number of concerns we had from our membership prior to the complete split, it seems like we are not getting near the volume that we used to.

“I think the independent schools are happy that they’re all together because that’s many more schools they can use for regular- season scheduling. That’s what a lot of them were really lobbying for in favor of the complete split. And then on the other side of that, public schools

that might have still been a little discontent with having to play independent schools now have that complete separation. I think everybody's a lot happier than they used to be."

Although the multiplier approach wasn't the ultimate resolution in Tennessee, there are state associations – such as the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) – that have found it to be successful.

The OHSAA's multiplier system, known throughout the state as its competitive balance factor, was approved by member schools in May 2014 to account for the free movement of students through the state's open enrollment approach to education.

"It started through the debate around whether public and private schools should be separated, but we didn't think it was a good thing to separate them completely," said Doug Ute, OHSAA executive director. "So, we set out to come up with a system – designed by a group made up of administrators and coaches from around the state of Ohio – to make things a little more equitable, so to speak. And one of the things we found out was that public schools get transfers, too."

In contrast to the OHSAA's true reclassification process, which is conducted every two years, the competitive balance factor induces school movement on an annual basis. Essentially, the system categorizes each student on each school team roster into Tier 0, Tier 1 or Tier 2 depending on the location of the student's family residence, as well as the student's history – or lack thereof – within their current school's district, attendance zone or "feeder" middle school program.

More specifically, students who attend the public high school in a single-school district must live with at least one parent inside that

school district to be classified as a Tier 0 student. If a student does not live in the district with at least one parent but has maintained continuous enrollment in that district since the start of seventh grade, the student receives a Tier 1 label.

In districts with multiple public high schools, students must live with a parent within their school's attendance zone to be in Tier 0; Tier 1 scores are given to students who live with a parent within the district and to those who meet the continuous enrollment requirement.

To be in Tier 0 in a non-public school, students are required to have attended their high school's designated feeder school since seventh grade. Students who enter their current high school after the start of ninth grade but have maintained the same system of education since the beginning of seventh grade are included in Tier 1.

All students who do not meet the listed criteria for their respective educational environment fall into Tier 2.

Once each student's tier is determined, the student is "multiplied" by the corresponding value attached to that tier. "Homegrown" Tier 0 students are multiplied by 0; Tier 1 students are multiplied by 1; and Tier 2 students are multiplied by 3 for football, and multiplied by 7 for soccer, volleyball, basketball, baseball and softball.

According to Bob Goldring, OHSAA director of communications and special projects, the 2022-23 academic year will see 25 of the association's 706 football-playing schools compete in a higher division as a result of competitive balance. Seven (of 567) schools will be moved up for boys soccer; seven of 520 for girls soccer; 11 of 780 for volleyball; 17 of 800 for boys basketball and 15 of 771 for girls

basketball. Due to season cancellations brought on by COVID-19, the factor has not been used for baseball or softball since 2019-20.

To prevent schools from dominating any one class for a given sport, the Indiana High School Athletic Association (IHSAA) has designated a "success" factor as part of its procedure.

Adopted in 2012, the success factor is built on a point system that evaluates schools' sport-by-sport postseason finishes over the two years of a standard reclassification period. Any program that wins a sectional championship is assigned one point, with two points credited for a regional championship, three for a semi-state championship and four for a state title.

If a school team accrues six or more points during those two seasons, that team will compete in the next-highest classification for the following two-year period. Should the program continue its same level of success in its new classification, it will be moved up once again, with no limit on how high it can climb.

Once elevated, teams must register two points during the next reclassification period to remain in the higher class. A team that has ascended multiple levels but fails to garner the two points necessary to stay in its current grouping will move back down the classification ladder one rung at a time.

"Traditionally – and there's really no hiding it – there have been more state championships won by private schools than by public schools based on the total number of those schools in the state," said Paul Neidig, IHSAA commissioner. "But we also know we have communities in this state that are very close communities; they have public schools,

but they look like private schools in a lot of ways. And I think that's one thing that has allowed (the success factor) to be successful – dependent upon the lens you're looking through – is that the rule is applied to every member school in Indiana, whether you're public or private."

Some schools have accomplished truly remarkable feats as byproducts of success-factor promotion. Perhaps the best example is the football program at Cathedral High School in Indianapolis, which has won a total of 14 IHSAA state championships and is currently the two-time defending state champions.

After winning back-to-back-to-back 4A state titles in 2010, 2011 and 2012, Cathedral was forced to join class 5A ahead of the 2013 season. Many schools may have needed some time to adjust to the heightened caliber of competition, but Cathedral needed no such thing, as it took home the 5A state championship in its first year, and then again in its second year.

Similarly, the Barr-Reeve High School volleyball program – a winner of numerous sectional and regional titles and two state championships in the 1A classification – clinched the 2A state title in its first season (2020).

Neidig revealed that during the association's most recent reclassification this past April, five schools saw at least one of their teams move up a class, while another five schools had teams that came down. Additionally, 20 schools that were already moved up at least one class earned enough points to stay put. (Success factor numbers for baseball and softball were not completed at the time of the interview.)

Like the WHSAA, the Oregon School Activities Association (OSAA) utilizes an ADM – but contrasts it as a three-year enrollment average in grades 9-11 – and reclassifies at larger intervals, sorting schools every four years. What sets the process apart, however, is the measure it has in place to account for the state’s socioeconomic spectrum, along with the inconsistencies in school funding and program access (training camps, clinics, etc.) that come with it.

The portion of students who receives free and reduced-price lunch (FR/Red) is the operative variable in the OSAA’s socioeconomic (SES) factor, a part of the association’s reclassification process since 2013. The first iteration of the rule, which stood until a policy amendment in 2020, granted each school an ADM deduction of 25 percent of its free- and reduced-price-lunch population.

“We had some athletic directors in our state that came in and put together a presentation that caught our attention,” said OSAA Executive Director Peter Weber of the initial inspiration for the SES factor. “Basically, they were looking at where some of our schools were finishing – season after season, sport after sport – in our rankings, and then compared that to what their free- and reduced-lunch percentages were.

“They removed the names of the schools, so people didn’t get biased about what (the schools) looked like, and we reviewed the information with them. And it was interesting because there were some trends that flowed through the information that showed there certainly was an impact in that area, and it started us talking about how we could address that.”

For schools with low FR/Red counts, like West Linn High School’s 187

out of 1,497 students, the SES makes a minimal difference – West Linn’s ADM drops by just 47 points (187 multiplied by 0.25) to its reclassification value of 1,450. For the 57 OSAA schools (out of 295) that have no students that receive free- and reduced-price lunches, the factor has no effect at all.

But for others, such as the 20 schools that have enrollments of more than 1,000 students and a FR/Red percentage of more than 50 percent, the SES factor can have a substantial impact. That statement will be especially true going forward, as the aforementioned policy amendment now grants a 40 percent SES factor for schools that are above the state average – a number Weber believes to be “around 48 or 49 percent.”

“After their review (of the impact), (The OSAA’s Computation of ADM Task Force) wanted to see that number adjusted for a little higher reduction,” said Weber. “The theory being that if everybody was treated identically with the 25 percent, those enrollments get adjusted, but we also have to adjust the cutoff points to make sure that we have a viable number of schools in each classification. And then if everything gets adjusted, it waters down the impact.”

An article on unique reclassification factors would be remiss if it didn’t mention the arrangement technique used for football programs in the Arizona Interscholastic Association (AIA).

AIA Executive Director David Hines described his association’s cataloging process for all other sports as “pretty traditional,” but admitted that the football model for its 2A-6A “conferences” – yet another term used interchangeably for class, division, etc. – is “outside of the box.”

After two years of consideration, the AIA adopted a system predicated on standard deviation – a mathematical measure of dispersion within a set of values – that compares teams' records over a three-year period to the mean win total for their classifications. Falling within one standard deviation of the mean generally signals that a school is right where it should be in terms of classification, while schools outside that range are considered outliers and are moved up or down based on where they are plotted. Movement is limited to two conferences, up or down, from a school's original classification.

"The first year we did it, we probably moved about eight schools up and eight schools down," Hines recalled. "What we found with all the schools we moved up was that every one of them was extremely competitive and made the playoffs in the larger conference the next year. And the teams that we moved down, we have found that they were not any better moving down. They're still in the very bottom of that lower conference."

Adding further divergence from the rest of its classification procedure is the fact that football is reclassified every year. Hines said that part of the rule is somewhat of a holdover from its experimental phase, but that talks to make football consistent with the two-year clock used for other sports are ongoing.

The basis for transitioning from a one-year to a two-year time period, Hines said, is to provide more stability for schools that may be rising too quickly, as he noted there have been a few powerhouse programs that have moved up two classifications in two years. For the bigger picture, however, instituting a two-year cycle is a strong indicator that the football trial run has been successful, an idea Hines very much agreed with.

"For the committee, it's not about winning championships, it's about being competitive," he said. "Before (the football model), we just had games that were absolutely not competitive. So, when we've had a dominant two or three teams that are in a particular conference and they have just been pounding other teams, we've moved them up and they have been competitive (in that conference) right away. And then the conference that they left also became more competitive because there is no one in there dominating. So, it's been really good for us overall."

According to documents from the most recent AIA reclassification meeting, a total of eight schools are playing up at least one conference (one in 6A, three in 5A, three in 4A, and one in 3A) and 11 schools are competing below their original classification (five in 5A, three in 4A and three in 3A).

With all the various factors and postseason mapping supporting the notion that state associations "decide the path" schools must travel to state-championship glory, it's no surprise that reclassification spawns some of the hottest high school sports debates across the country. And while some of the "feedback" issued by constituents over the years has been especially sharp, emotionally- driven and regrettable, all of it – even the harshest criticisms – goes to show just how special high school sports are to so many.

"It's important to acknowledge that the debates around these types of discussions are good because they show that it matters (to people)," said Neidig. "If it didn't matter, there'd be no debate. The education-based system is just different; it's different from the AAU or any other system, and if we're debating what's best for student- athletes in an environment that they can still learn and that supports the educational

mission of schools, then let's have that debate."