

States Continue to Address Competitive Balance of Schools

BY Cody Porter ON April 12, 2017 | HST, APRIL, 2017, FEATURES

The search for competitive balance of schools has led many state associations in recent years to develop multiplier rules, formulas or other plans to address this issue. Indiana's "tournament success factor" and Oregon's school socioeconomic status (SES) factor are among the plans instituted to address any perceived imbalance between private and public schools in athletic competition.

In last month's issue of High School Today, 21 state associations indicated that they employ a multiplier or other plan to level the playing field among their schools. That number is up from 2009 when eight of the 50 member state associations, plus the District of Columbia, had adopted a multiplier. Through this plan, private schools are reclassified to compete against larger schools in team sports.

"The discussion's not about public and private. It's about winning, and that's where everyone gets uncomfortable," said Bobby Cox, Indiana High School Athletic Association (IHSAA) commissioner. "The public doesn't want to see a team continue to go to the state championship and continue to win the sectionals and regionals on the way to state every single year. They would like to see more schools have that opportunity."

Cox and the IHSAA are among the states to stray from multipliers, instead opting to author the success factor. In Indiana, the success factor, also known as Rule 2-5 of the IHSAA bylaws, states that if a school in any classification reaches six points or greater during the previous reclassification period (two-year cycle) in a specific sport's tournament series, the school will be promoted to the next available higher enrollment class for the next reclassification period. Schools earn one point for a sectional championship, two points for a regional championship, three points for a semi-state championship and four points for a state championship.

"Over the years leading up to us authoring the success factor, we observed a variety of states that use multipliers, reverse multipliers, counting students as less than a full student for those that might be on free and reduced lunch, and things of that nature. We even had some of those things proposed to our board of directors," Cox said. "In each case, the board did not feel comfortable with multiplying students artificially to get to some kind of number that would place them in a different enrollment classification."

The success factor has proved valuable since its inception during the 2013-14 school year, according to Cox. He indicated that the state has seen improved contests, fewer repeat champions and more first-time schools reaching state finals than ever before. At the end of the 2014-15 school year, the first two-year cycle of the success factor, a perfect balance of 13 private schools and 13 public schools were reclassified.

"We've been able to forward our concept to our members and it's really dampened the discussion in Indiana about public versus private. To be honest, I don't really ever hear it anymore. It's more about who's winning," Cox said. "Now, we'll get some pushback. It's not to

say it's perfect, but there's no silver bullet that's going to solve competition. There's not a state association in our country that's going come up with something that can 100 percent solve competition. It's not going to happen. But this is one that our folks can live with because it's applicable to everyone – not just private schools, not just charter schools. The success factor is applicable to all of our 410 members."

The Ohio High School Athletic Association's (OHSAA) competitive balance plan is a more complex take on what Indiana has been able to do with its success factor. Scheduled to be implemented in the 2017-18 school year, the plan imposes a formula across eight sports (football, volleyball, boys soccer, girls soccer, boys basketball, girls basketball, baseball and softball) that assigns tiers zero, one or two to students in grades 9-12.

"For public schools, factors will be added depending upon where the student and his or her parents reside for each student on each team's roster," said Bob Goldring, OHSAA associate commissioner. "For non-public schools, factors could be added depending upon the educational history of the students on each particular team's roster."

The competitive balance plan was passed by member schools in May 2014 after proposals failed in 2011, 2012 and 2013. In 2010, the OHSAA's Competitive Balance Committee was formed as a response to a growing concern from member schools regarding the number of state championships being won by non-public schools, which Goldring said was approximately 43 percent. Non-public schools comprised only 17 percent of the OHSAA's membership.

Oregon's approach, based on free and reduced lunch percentages, was put in place four years ago and coincides with the Oregon School Activities Association's (OSAA) team sports ranking system.

"We had looked at a multiplier for private schools," said Peter Weber, OSAA executive director. "Every four years we do our reclassification and redistricting. In the past, we had looked at what some other states had done, some issues that had come out of that, and played with some numbers. Here in Oregon, it didn't really seem to address the issue appropriately."

What resulted was the association beginning preliminary discussions in which it looked at free and reduced lunch percentages thanks to previously conducted research in the state based on its ranking system. Research unveiled a correlation between the schools with very high percentages of free and reduced lunch and the schools that finished in the lower 25 percent of team sports rankings.

Weber added that the OSAA also developed criteria that allows schools to petition to play down – not just up – a class after experiencing a lack of success at a higher classification. To be automatically approved, schools must meet all four criteria during a four-year time block:

1. Documentation showing the school's percentage of students on free lunch at 50 percent or higher.
2. Documentation showing that the school's teams finished in the bottom 50 percent of the final frozen rankings at their current classification at least 75 percent of the time for the previous three years.
3. Documentation showing that the school's teams finished in the bottom 20 percent of the final frozen rankings at their current classification at least 50 percent of the time for the previous three years.
4. Documentation showing that the winning percentage for the school's teams in team sports was 25 percent or less at least 40 percent of the time for the previous three

years.

Although more than 40 percent of state associations have adopted competitive balance plans, a true solution may never be clear. Mike Colbrese, executive director of the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association, said one issue for states is treating one part of the membership different than the other.

"It's like making sports rules," Colbrese said. "You've got to make sure that you don't change the rule so much that you don't tip the balance of the offense and defense schematic, and so you have to be sensitive to all factors. The basic issue of whether a student is in a public or private school is that you're still dealing with students. They all deserve an opportunity to participate and to be treated fairly."

In Ohio, Goldring said he believes there are three concerns with the new competitive balance plan. First, it is a very complex plan for the OHSAA's member schools, the public and the media to understand. Second, he said entering roster data can be a time-consuming task for administrators. Third, there is the issue of how success is determined with regard to the effectiveness of the plan.

"... Perhaps this plan will allow for more public schools to advance in our state tournaments and maybe even allow for more to win championships," Goldring said. "However, there is nothing that says what that magic number will be that will make our schools – and in particular public schools – say that the plan is working."

Bernard Childress, executive director of the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association (TSSAA), said the state's "need-based financial aid" multiplier hasn't presented the perfect solution since it was put in place in 1997-98.

"You have smaller numbers of private schools that are in Division I since the multiplier was put in place," Childress said. "That has paved the way for schools to win championships, but you're looking for competitive balance, a level playing field so to speak, not winning championships. We're not interested in designing a classification based upon who can win a championship; that's not what educational athletics should be about."

Tennessee's private schools can elect whether to provide needbased financial aid to athletes or their siblings. For the majority that do, they are placed in the independent school-laden Division II. The small group that doesn't provide that assistance are placed in Division I with public schools and have their enrollment classification multiplied by 1.8.

"A lot of people in surrounding states think that since you've been doing it for so long, you've got it figured out. We still don't have it figured out," Childress said. "It's still something that is a real hub-bub in our state."