

When It Wasn't There: Understanding the Importance of High School Sports

Authors : Karen Chad, Louise Humbert, Kenzie Friesen, Dave Sandomirsky

Abstract : Background: The pandemic of COVID-19 presented many historical challenges to the sporting community. For organizations and individuals, sport was put on hold resulting in social, economic, physical, and mental health consequences for all involved. High school sports are seen as an effective and accessible pathway for students to receive health, social, and academic benefits. Studies examining sport cessation due to COVID-19 found substantial negative outcomes on the physical and mental well-being of participants in the high school setting. However, the pandemic afforded an opportunity to examine sport participation and the value people place upon their engagement in high school sport. Study objectives: (1) Examine the experiences of students, parents, administrators, officials, and coaches during a year without high school sports; (2) Understand why participants are involved in high school sports; and (3) Learn what supports are needed for future involvement. Methodology: A mixed method design was used, including semi-structured interviews and a survey (SurveyMonkey software), which was disseminated electronically to high school students, coaches, school administrators, parents, and officials. Results: 1222 respondents completed the survey. Findings showed: (1) 100% of students participate in high school sports to improve their mental health, with >95% said it keeps them active and healthy, helps them make friends and teaches teamwork, builds confidence and positive self-perceptions, teaches resiliency, enhances connectivity to their school, and supports academic learning; (2) Top three reasons teachers coach is their desire to make a difference in the lives of students, enjoyment, and love of the sport, and to give back. Teachers said what they enjoy most is contributing to and watching athletes develop, direct involvement with student sport success, and the competitive atmosphere; (3) 90% of parents believe playing sports is a valuable experience for their child, 95% said it enriches student academic learning and educational experiences, and 97% encouraged their child to play school sports; (4) Officials participate because of their enjoyment and love of the sport, experience, and expertise, desire to make a difference in the lives of children, the competitive/sporting atmosphere and growing the sport. 4% of officials said it was financially motivated; (5) 100% of administrators said high school sports are important for everyone. 80% believed the pandemic will decrease teachers coaching and increase student mental health and well-being. When there was no sport, many athletes got a part-time job and tried to stay active, with limited success. Coaches, officials, and parents spent more time with family. All participants did little physical activity, were bored; and struggled with mental health and poor physical health. Respondents recommended better communication, promotion, and branding of high school sport benefits, equitable funding for all sports, athlete development, compensation and recognition for coaching, and simple processes to strengthen the high school sport model. Conclusions: High school sport is an effective vehicle for athletes, parents, coaches, administrators, and officials to derive many positive outcomes. When it is taken away, serious consequences prevail. Paying attention to important success factors will be important for the effectiveness of high school sports.

Keywords : physical activity, high school, sports, pandemic

Conference Title : ICAPESS 2023 : International Conference on Advances in Physical Education and Sport Science

Conference Location : London, United Kingdom

Conference Dates : April 17-18, 2023