
RESPONSES FROM THE FIELD

In an effort to encourage dialogue and reflection on matters of common concern and interest, we invite responses on selected articles from other educators, who engage the text critically and offer some reflections about its utility and validity.

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Our principal heads the group of Catholic school leaders who fought the multiplier in Illinois by suing the Illinois High School Association (IHSA). The multiplier was set at 1.65 by the Legislative Commission of the Association. We fought the multiplier in court in Cook County, Illinois. The arbitrated consent agreement mandated that the multiplier go to the full membership for a vote. The multiplier passed overwhelmingly and was imposed for the school year 2006-2007.

A handful of private schools in Illinois have been very successful in particular sports; several in football, some in volleyball, and others in basketball and wrestling. These successes, which embrace many different Catholic high schools, are the areas where the greatest resentment over Catholic school athletic success is found. The reasons for these bad feelings among public school officials may arguably be reduced to a few comments.

The success enjoyed in athletics by the under-funded private schools is an embarrassment to the public school establishment. The newspapers and the public compare the athletic success achieved by Catholic schools to the lesser success of public schools which are well funded in many districts and have the finest facilities. The lack of athletic success in public schools encourages the public to ask why its tax money does not produce more successful teams. In our area public schools claim they are providing a superb education, first-rate opportunities, superior teachers and coaches, and yet do not achieve the athletic success seen at local Catholic schools. Some public school leaders in the area are knowledgeable about how Catholic schools work, or have in fact, sent their own children to Catholic schools. They recognize that Catholic school programs often work smarter, have more dedicated staff, have stronger discipline and higher expectations than public schools. Many public school advocates sincerely believe that the reason for Catholic school success is because we do not have boundaries and accept students from outside of the public school district.

A second erroneous perception on the part of some in public schools is their belief that all school children who live in their district are public school property. This unspoken but possessive point of view reflects itself in the attitude that Catholic schools are trespassers interloping in the domain of education, and have no business pulling students from the public school districts to attend a Catholic school. All are well aware that the amount of state aid paid to public schools is dependent on enrollment. Catholic school children who do not attend public schools in their home district are blamed for removing money from the public school district which would be theirs if there were no Catholic school.

Finally, there are those among public school educators and the press who seriously believe that our identity as religious schools is nonsense, and that we are merely private schools providing a safe environment, free from the need to accept special education or difficult and troubled children. They accuse us of providing unfair athletic support and athletic-based scholarships to create superior athletic teams. Our religious mission, tradition of faith, and practice of our faith through prayers, liturgies, retreats, and the teaching of values is, in the perception of some, only a smoke screen, an excuse for taking unfair advantage of the athletic system.

Our experience with the Illinois High School Association has been one of frustration and growing aggravation. It is not feasible for the private schools in Illinois to form a separate association for athletic competition or to conduct tournaments for state championships. We understand that state associations are voluntary organizations and are therefore able to create rules and regulations which may be voted upon by the membership. The excellent article by John James has informed us that many states, not just Illinois, have experimented with or implemented the multiplier. We are grateful for this useful research.

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Is the effort undertaken in numerous states to apply a multiplier to private and parochial schools for the purpose of athletic competition arbitrary, capricious, and, taken to the extreme, an effort to “segregate?” John T. James’ article certainly presents a comprehensive and compelling argument to that end.

My personal view is that his perspective is somewhat narrow. I am a product of parochial education, kindergarten through undergraduate years.

My 42-year professional life has been spent in urban public education, with stints as a high school athletic director, and as the athletic director for a school district of 20,000 students plus.

My perspective suggests that in today's world, success equates with access. Families who typically have the financial wherewithal to send their students to private or parochial schools are able to make similar financial commitments to help their children's athletic development. Successful athletic programs typically have participants who are in training throughout the year, not just during their respective seasons. Summer camps, either instructional or competitive, are part of their experience. Often, they obtain the services of private trainers or training centers.

For many public school students and their families, particularly those in urban areas, financial resources limit the extent to which their student athletes are able to participate in out-of-season training. Further limitations are imposed when students are encouraged by families to find a job so they can help with family budgets.

The issue of equity of access surfaces elsewhere. Public school systems throughout the country depend on public referenda to raise money for construction, renovation, or maintenance of buildings, playing fields, and equipment. As our nation's population ages, and fewer taxpayers have children in school, the tax revenues available to support athletic programs have decreased significantly. "Pay for play" initiatives have become common throughout public schools nationally. Public fundraising appeals specifically for helping to underwrite athletic programs have generally not been well received.

My parents struggled to put seven children through private education. Many parents today do the same. That being said, the perception is widespread that children attending private or parochial schools have greater access to life's extras than many students attending public school. For many, perception is reality. When that perception is reinforced by ongoing success of specific private or parochial schools in specific realms, the natural reaction is to cry "foul." The implementation of a multiplier should be viewed as an effort to rectify a perceived inequality.

Personally, few of the multipliers reviewed by James have been based on what should be taken into account: the economic background of the student population. I would posit that by using a multiplier determined by the number of families receiving free or reduced lunch, issues of equity would be addressed more directly. There is no question that "success builds success" as James strongly reasserts. That reality extends to beyond the playing field, and only by assuring equity of access and resources, can the playing fields of our nation be leveled.