



REIMAGINING
SCHOOL SPORTS

LARGE RURAL PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS



Sport for All, Play for Life
A Playbook to Develop Every
Student Through Sports

A Project Play initiative of the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program, “Reimagining School Sports” recognizes the essential role that high schools play in preparing young people for life – and the cognitive, educational and health benefits that flow to students whose bodies are in motion. The initiative aims to make quality sport and physical activities accessible to all students by identifying strategies that administrators and other leaders can adopt, aligned with the mission of schools and within the context of a comprehensive education.

In the United States, school decisions are made largely at the local and state levels. Further, the ability to engage students in sports is shaped by a school’s size, mission and resources. So, Project Play launched a national search to find the trailblazers in eight school types. That way, principals, superintendents, athletic directors, coaches, physical education teachers and others can draw inspiration from their best peer fit.

The eight school types:

- Large urban public high schools
- Small urban public high schools
- Large rural public high schools
- Small rural public high schools
- Large suburban public high schools
- Small suburban public high schools
- Private schools
- Charter schools

The Aspen Institute invites any school to share their innovations and apply for recognition. A \$20,000 award will be given to one winner in each category, made possible by our project partners – Adidas/Reebok, The Dick’s Sporting Goods Foundation, and Hospital for Special Surgery. Reports on each school type are being released in 2021, followed by a final report in early 2022 that will make systems-level recommendations that can drive progress across all school types.

About Project Play

Project Play is an initiative of the Aspen Institute’s Sports & Society Program, the mission of which is to convene leaders, facilitate dialogue and inspire solutions that help sport serve the public interest. Since 2013, Project Play has shepherded the national conversation around what good looks like in youth sports. Hundreds of organizations have used Project Play frameworks and ideas to introduce programs, expand grantmaking, shape government policy, advance research, and develop tools to train coaches, empower parents and mobilize leaders.

To learn more about the value of sports and physical activities, please visit as.pn/sportsfacts



Learn more about this project and find all reports at: as.pn/schoolsports

Challenges and Opportunities: Large Rural Public Schools

Nationally, 73% of rural public high schools offer interscholastic sports, according to an Aspen Institute-commissioned analysis of 2017-18 Civil Rights Data Collection by Resonant Education.¹ More rural students (42%) play on teams than their suburban (41%) and urban (33%) peers, with those teams often serving as rallying points for their communities. But the challenges today run as deep as local enthusiasm for those proud programs.

Even in large rural public schools, filling rosters can be difficult amid declining student populations. Wrote one analyst in *Forbes* magazine: “Even if some place hasn’t lost its school yet, they may be losing their teams, and that’s a very stark reminder of how they’re losing their identity.”² Some school districts have resisted consolidation in part to preserve crosstown rivalry games.³

From 2008 to 2018, high school sports participation declined by a combined 4% in the five most rural U.S. states (Maine, Vermont, West Virginia, Mississippi, Montana). During that same period, participation increased 7% among the five least rural states (California, New Jersey, Nevada, Massachusetts, Hawaii). The gap is even more pronounced when comparing 1998 to 2018 rates: the least rural states saw 37% growth, while participation in the most rural states grew just 9%.⁴

These are worrying trends, especially in areas with high poverty. There’s a racial and ethnic dimension as well: Economically distressed counties are home to more than half of rural Black residents and 45% of rural Native American residents, compared to only 18% of rural White residents.⁵ But the challenges transcend race, with many rural schools requiring students to travel from far distances. In a national survey of high school students by the Aspen Institute, youth from rural schools were twice as likely as those from urban areas to cite transportation as a reason they don’t play sports more often. In Pennsylvania, only 16% of rural schools offer activity buses for transportation.⁶

Characteristics of Rural Schools

For purposes of this report, the Aspen Institute defines a large rural school as a public school in a rural area with more than 350 students. The Census Bureau defines a rural area as any population, housing or territory not in an urban area (50,000 or more residents) or urban cluster (2,500-50,000 residents).

Land-wise, rural areas cover most of the country. However, only 19% of Americans live in these places – down from 60% at the turn of the 20th century when sports were first introduced in schools.⁷ Today, 53% of U.S. school districts are located in a rural community⁸ with 17% of state education funds going to rural school districts.⁹ Jobs continue to shift to the cities. From 2014 to 2018, 43% of rural counties experienced negative employment growth compared with just 17% elsewhere. The poverty rate is nearly three percentage points higher. Rural counties with a manufacturing base do better than those dependent on farms, with those reliant on mining or government jobs at the bottom.¹⁰ Shrinking tax bases have led to decisions to close and consolidate some schools, imposing transportation challenges on families.

Compared to their urban and suburban peers, students at rural schools are the most likely to say they don’t play sports because they lack the time due to work or family responsibilities, according to the Institute’s survey.

They more often believe they aren't good enough to play. Winning games and making their family feel proud matter more to rural youth — especially among girls — than students elsewhere. At the same time, athletes can get burned out by parents, drawn by the allure of college athletic scholarships, who turn sports for their child into a “pass/fail test that makes it feel like a job,” one rural athletic director told us.

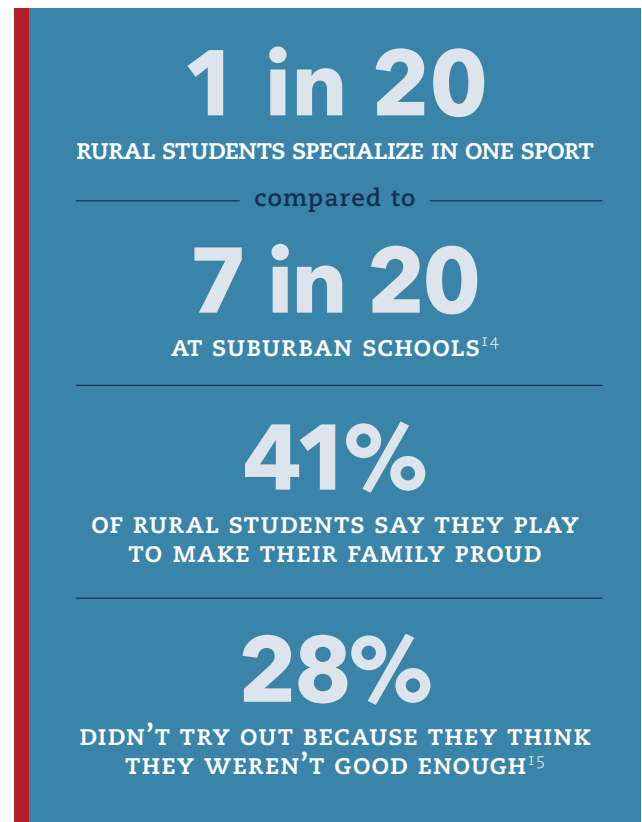
Fewer school resources can bring health risks. More than 78% of schools nationally with low athletic trainer availability are in rural and inner-city areas, according to the National Athletic Trainers' Association. Athletes in these communities are 50% more likely to have a sports-related concussion that goes unidentified, unassessed, or mismanaged.¹¹

Some bright spots for rural schools: 71% of students said they enjoy PE, a higher rate than for all schools (62%), according to the Institute's survey. Students in rural communities report the highest levels of participation in basketball, softball, and track and field. Football in rural areas is especially popular among Black students (42%), who have played the sport more often than Black students from suburban (27%) and urban (25%) schools. Also, 58% of rural Hispanic students say they have played soccer, well above the national average for students in all schools (39%).

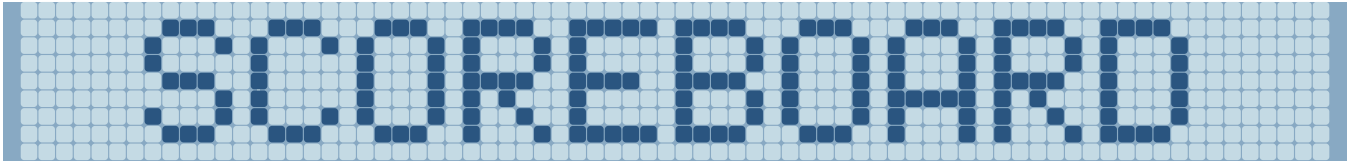


Highly specialized athletes are less common at rural high schools (one in 20) than suburban schools (seven in 20). Rural athletes are three times less likely than suburban athletes to play 60 or more games per year in their primary sport.¹² Rural schools tend to need more students – usually the best athletes – to play multiple sports in order to field teams. During the pandemic, some are playing three sports at once. Said one athletic director: “If we made our kids pick one sport, every team would suffer and lose.”

With so few businesses to help rural schools financially, administrators say they view fundraisers, donated equipment, community service by athletes, and attendance at local games as a valuable connection with their community. Rural areas have much larger issues to address than a decline in sports, “but there's a final nail-in-the-coffin quality to seeing your local school sports teams struggle or disappear.”¹³ Some fresh perspective can help update the model.



LARGE RURAL PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS













The Aspen Institute conducted a national survey of ninth- to 12th-graders between September 2020 and March 2021. The sample represented students from public, charter and private schools across the country. The survey was conducted via an online platform and results were analyzed by Resonant Education. Here is what rural students told us.











Top sports rural students play at school

(played at least one full season on a team)












Female

	31%	Volleyball
	29%	Basketball
	28%	Track and Field
	21%	Softball
	15%	Soccer
	11%	Cheerleading
	9%	Tennis
	8%	Cross Country
	5%	Swimming
	3%	Golf

Male



	40%	Tackle Football
	23%	Track and Field
	21%	Baseball
	28%	Basketball
	20%	Soccer
	11%	Wrestling
	9%	Cross Country
	8%	Tennis
	8%	Weightlifting
	6%	Swimming

All











	28%	Basketball
	25%	Track and Field
	20%	Tackle Football
	18%	Volleyball
	17%	Soccer
	11%	Softball
	10%	Baseball
	9%	Cross Country
	8%	Tennis
	6%	Cheerleading
	6%	Wrestling

Top sports that rural students wish their school offered














Female

	15%	Gymnastics
	12%	Archery
	11%	Lacrosse
	10%	Dance
	9%	Bowling
	8%	Ice Hockey
	7%	Cheerleading
	6%	Flag Football
	6%	Skiing
	6%	Badminton
	6%	Swimming
	6%	Soccer

Male









	13%	Archery
	12%	Bowling
	9%	Ice Hockey
	8%	Ultimate Frisbee
	7%	Lacrosse
	6%	Flag Football
	6%	Weightlifting
	5%	Skiing
	5%	Badminton
	5%	Water Polo

All









	13%	Archery
	10%	Bowling
	9%	Gymnastics
	9%	Lacrosse
	9%	Ice Hockey
	6%	Flag Football
	6%	Skiing
	6%	Dance
	6%	Ultimate Frisbee
	5%	Badminton
	5%	Swimming
	5%	Weightlifting
	5%	Water Polo

Other physical activities rural students want to try









Female

-  30% Dance
-  29% Yoga
-  27% Strength training
-  24% Skateboarding
-  23% Biking
-  21% Climbing
-  19% General fitness classes
-  15% Outdoor recreation

Male

-  45% Strength training
-  26% Biking
-  22% Climbing
-  22% Parkour
-  19% General fitness classes
-  18% Outdoor recreation
-  17% Skateboarding
-  17% Adventure Racing

All

-  34% Strength training
-  25% Biking
-  22% Climbing
-  21% Skateboarding
-  19% General fitness classes
-  18% Yoga
-  18% Dance
-  16% Outdoor recreation

Why rural students play sports

Reason	Female	Male	All
Have fun	82%	81%	81%
Exercise	77%	78%	77%
Learn and improve skills	69%	66%	67%
Playing with and making new friends	66%	61%	63%
Competing	57%	67%	61%
Winning games/championships	53%	63%	57%
Emotional/mental health	53%	39%	47%
Improve college application	46%	38%	42%
College scholarships	40%	44%	41%
Making my family proud	44%	37%	41%

What prevents rural students from playing sports

Reason	Female	Male	All
Too much schoolwork	46%	35%	42%
I don't enjoy sports	32%	27%	30%
Didn't try out/not good enough	31%	24%	28%
Work schedule	25%	24%	25%
No offered sports interest me	19%	26%	23%
Family responsibilities	26%	17%	23%
I don't feel welcome	18%	12%	16%
My friends don't play	16%	11%	14%
Too expensive	15%	10%	13%
Transportation challenges	14%	12%	13%



WINNER: LARGE RURAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS



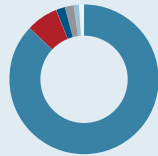
REIMAGINING SCHOOL SPORTS

Jennings County High School

North Vernon, IN

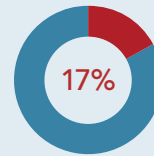


Location

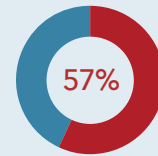


Race/ethnicity

- White (89%)
- Hispanic (7%)
- Two or more races (2%)
- Other (2%)
- Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander (0.3%)
- Black (0.2%)



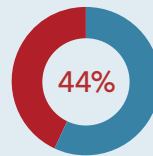
Disability



Free/reduced lunch

Sports program costs: **\$287,379¹⁶**

Percentage of total school costs: **3.3%**



Students who play interscholastic/intramural sports or participate in school clubs involving physical activity (out of 1,168 students)

Interscholastic

- | | | | |
|----------------|-----------------|------------|-------------------|
| 🏹 Archery | 🏃 Cross Country | ⚾ Softball | 🏊 Track and Field |
| ⚾ Baseball | ⚽ Football | 🏊 Swimming | 🏐 Volleyball |
| 🏀 Basketball | 💡 Golf | 🎾 Tennis | 🏍 Wrestling |
| 👯 Cheerleading | ⚽ Soccer | | |

Intramural

- None

- Club
- None

Website
jchs.jcsc.org

Contact **Cory Stevens**, Athletic Director,
cstevens@jcsc.org



OUR WINNING SCHOOL RECEIVES
\$20,000 AWARD

COURTESY OF



WINNER'S INNOVATION / JENNINGS COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL

Don't Judge Coaches by Wins

As Jennings County High School searched for a new athletic director in 2019, Principal Dustin Roller decided his next hire needed to better evaluate coaches. A rumor had circulated that some school board members wanted to require all coaches from the North Vernon, Indiana school win at least 60% of their games for their contract to be renewed.

Roller researched the school's history since 1968 and found only one coach would have reached that benchmark. Historically, the school wins about half of its games in most sports – the football team only wins 27%, with just one winning season since 1998¹⁷ – and cycles through up and down seasons. Last season, the boys basketball team won 52% of its games while the girls won 70%, including two playoff games. Multiyear contracts are provided to coaches in football, boys basketball and girls basketball – a mix of full-time teachers and outside employees paid to coach; all other coaches are renewed annually.

“

I want kids to leave here with the lessons learned in athletics that make them better teachers, doctors, managers, employees, father and mothers.

Cory Stevens, Athletic Director

”

Basketball dominates the sports culture of Indiana, whose coaching icons over the generations have shaped national ideas about what's right about coaching ([John Wooden's Pyramid of Success](#)) and what's wrong with it ([Bob Knight's tirades while worshiped by fans](#)). Roller worried that a minimum winning percentage would incent coaches to prioritize game results over youth development.



“Don't get me wrong: I'm as competitive as they come,” he says. “But I also want our coaches to know that in high school athletics, it's bigger than wins and losses. I want kids to leave here with the lessons learned in athletics that make them better teachers, doctors, managers, employees, father and mothers.”

The measures that school administrators put in place to encourage that type of coaching is a model for other schools that seek the same outcomes. For its courage and leadership, Jennings County is recognized as the Aspen Institute's Project Play winner in the Large Rural Schools category of our Reimagining School Sports initiative.

Prior to 2019, Jennings County's evaluation process of coaches involved a written narrative by the athletic director that lacked consistency or any real standards on what was being reviewed. The coach signed the form and usually had one brief discussion with the AD. One Jennings County coach laughs now at how basic the process used to be.

The school board never adopted a policy attaching winning to coaching success. But the rumor led Jennings County to something more valuable: The hiring of Athletic Director Cory Stevens, who brought a more comprehensive process to evaluating coaches while, theoretically, taking wins and losses out of the equation.



The two-page document Stevens now uses is called the Deserve to Win Grid ([read the entire document here](#)). It covers 28 areas in which Jennings County coaches are evaluated, including: creating a safe environment, increasing sports opportunities for younger children, providing academic opportunities for athletes beyond maintaining playing eligibility, understanding racial and gender discrimination, and demonstrating interpersonal relationships with athletes, parents, coworkers, and administrators.

“I really like the idea of focusing on the process and not necessarily the results while giving coaches exactly what they are being measured on,” Stevens says.

So did girls basketball coach Kristi Sigler, a former All-Big Ten player at Indiana University. “I had never seen anything like it before,” she says. “It really made me step back and think, ‘Where is our program on all of this? Do we do something worse than we should? Where will we be in the future?’ I like it. It holds you accountable.”

School officials say their approach can be modeled by other schools if they commit to two features: Embrace a more professionalized approach to coaching – don’t just throw ideas against the wall and hope something sticks – and recognize that each athlete is a unique person. Roller, a former football coach until 2016, says he cringes now at how he used to coach.

“I was replicating the way I had been coached, and you have to get rid of the one-size-fits-all Bear Bryant approach of either kids quit or they get better,” he says. “Some kids need your confidence until they can form it themselves.”

That’s easier said than done In Indiana. “Our basketball coaches are very talented, and as a whole, they still have a little Bob Knight influence on the game with their combustible attitude at times,” says Paul Neidig, commissioner of the Indiana High School Athletic Association.

The school’s community of North Vernon (population 6,700) is an economically distressed area¹⁸ dotted with basketball hoops outside houses. Before the pandemic, 6,000 fans could pack into the high school gym for big games. Even though fifth-year Jennings County boys basketball coach Josh Lands believes his AD does not evaluate him based on his record, he says, “I get evaluated by the rest of the community. Their criticisms may solely be based on wins and losses and the stuff said at the dinner table. That’s important to me too. But I believe coaches that win do all those other little things and winning will take care of itself.”

Stevens, the new AD, came from the Chicago suburbs, where he previously handled major gifts and sponsorships at a college. He was used to metrics defining success. Roller was looking for someone who does not necessarily always see the world as he does.



“It’s been so valuable to us in a rural community bringing a different view to hear what Cory saw in the suburbs,” Roller says.

Listening is also the value of the Deserve to Win Grid because it serves as a jumping-off point for conversations. Stevens talks with his coaches in the preseason, using the grid as a planning guide. Conversations continue organically throughout the season. After the season, Stevens and the coach each complete the form, including sections to write in details about the coach’s strengths and opportunities for growth. Then they meet to discuss the evaluation.

Coaches are evaluated in each area by a four-point scale: not acceptable (1), needs improvement (2), meets the expectation (3), and exceeds the expectation (4). Stevens does not calculate the data, adding that’s “a great next step” to better define what the scores mean. The data have not been used as a tool to provide raises – something that some coaches say they wouldn’t mind seeing.

“If you’re getting 2s and 1s in multiple areas, there needs to be a real conversation on what your role is moving forward in our athletic department,” Stevens says. “I’m getting ready to have one of those conversations (with a coach) very soon.”

“

I really like the idea of focusing on the process and not necessarily the results while giving coaches exactly what they are being measured on.

Cory Stevens, Athletic Director

”

The process can be time-consuming, but Stevens believes it’s worth it. Some coaches, for example, realized through the new process that they never reach out to alumni – a valuable resource in rural communities. Alumni can help mentor students and fundraiser for the program.

Sigler, the girls basketball coach, learned she could communicate better to players and parents about playing time and roles after nearly having a sophomore player quit. “Girls compare themselves to others, and if they don’t see themselves being a true contributor or hear that from their friends or parents, they step away,” she says. “I wasn’t communicating well enough with her on where she fit.” The girl stayed on the team and was honored as a senior at the awards banquet.

Brantley Wathen, a senior track and field athlete and cheerleader, says she appreciates that Jennings County coaches are now evaluated by helping players become better people. “My coaches can see that our parents are hard on us, and (the coaches) tell us you’re not running against other teams, you’re running against yourself to get better,” she says. “They never yell. They’re always calm with us. They don’t treat us like we’re below them. They make us feel we’re all on the same playing field.”

Creating that safe space is important, given the Aspen Institute national survey showing that 18% of female students and 12% of male students in rural public schools say they don’t play sports because “I don’t feel welcome.” Both figures are above the national averages for all schools (14% and 10%, respectively).

Rural students are twice as likely as suburban students to say they don't feel safe playing sports because of their gender identity or sexual preference.

At Jennings County, Roller learned this three years ago when two incoming students who are transgender expressed concern about physical education classes upon entering the school. Roller says he was – and probably still is – “really ignorant” about challenges facing transgender youth. He says he told the students and their families: Help teach me, be honest about your feelings, and provide me some grace if I mess up. Roller discovered the students felt uncomfortable that Jennings County had separate PE classes for boys and girls – an unusual practice for any school these days. He says it's not clear why the school split PE.

“That's just the way it's always been – which is something you hear in our community a lot,” Roller says. “In rural, conservative communities, sometimes you say, if it's not broken, why fix it? Well, sometimes it can be better for everybody.”

As a result of the conversations, Jennings County has piloted coed PE for several classes without any problems and the change resulted in fewer discipline issues than the split-gender classes, Roller says. Next year, every PE class will be coed.

By intentionally leaving its comfort zone, Jennings County serves as a model for others to prioritize development over winning at all costs in high school sports.

“As a society, we're always so shocked when we hear about coach abuse or cheating,” Roller says. “But we create that as administrators, fans and boosters based off our expectations. If you tell me it only matters if I win or lose, I'm going to do everything I can to win. That's a natural, human element.”

Jennings County is now banking on the opposite to be true: Don't judge coaches based on game results, and maybe they will naturally produce more well-rounded people who become athletes for life. That's a win worth chasing.

The Art and Science of Coaching

There's room to improve Jennings County's approach. While its *Deserve to Win Grid* identifies many well-recognized dimensions of positive youth development, the framework could be improved to address the art and science of coaching, says Vincent Minjares, who has a Phd in coaching and pedagogy and studies coaching models in the U.S. and New Zealand. If society truly wants coaches to be viewed as teachers, Minjares says, the learning experience of a sport should be part of evaluating coaches by asking questions like these:

- How does the coach define success?
- Does the coach create a sense of belonging where each player has a meaningful role?
- Does the coach empower players by providing opportunities for independent decision-making and athlete ownership?
- Does the coach emphasize play as the primary learning tool?
- Does the coach ask questions that encourage the players to find answers themselves?
- Does the coach use process-focused praise?
- Does the coach design learning games, with multiple possible solutions, to develop problem solving?

HONOR ROLL IDEAS

Strategies that Jennings County High School uses that stood out as exemplary to the Aspen Institute and our project advisory board:

Partner with elementary schools

Jennings County is hiring the community’s first elementary school athletic director, thanks to a partnership with the NFL’s Fuel Up to Play 60 that will teach elementary students about healthy life choices, including physical activity and nutrition. High school athletes will help teach the younger students.

Expand the leadership roles of athletes

That’s what Jennings County does through its Student-Athlete Leadership Team (one athlete per team), which focuses on six areas: blending Unified sports into the school culture, improving event attendance, rewriting the athletic code on behavioral rules and punishments, motivating athletes to play sports all year, representation on local committees and boards, and mentoring younger athletes.

Require in-person PE for freshmen

Jennings County is one of the last schools in Indiana that mandates in-person PE for freshman. Roller says many schools try to get around that as a cost-cutting measure by offering summer online classes or credit from sports or band participation. Physical activity offers a valuable release during the school day.



Tool for School Leaders

Among the top 10 sports played by boys and girls in high schools nationally, soccer (boys) and basketball (girls) deliver the most social and emotional benefits. That’s one of many findings in the Healthy Sport Index, a data-driven project of the Aspen Institute and Hospital for Special Surgery that analyzes the relative benefits and risks of playing each sport.

Learn more at: healthysportindex.com



Healthy Sport Index

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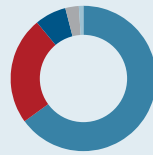
MORE HONOR ROLL IDEAS

Strategies that our other three finalists use that stood out to us as exemplary:

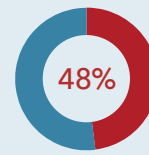
Morgan County High School | Madison, GA



Location



Race/ethnicity



Students who play interscholastic/intramural sports or participate in school clubs involving physical activity

Interscholastic

- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Baseball | Golf |
| Basketball | Soccer |
| Bass Fishing | Softball |
| Cheerleading | Swimming |
| Cross Country | Tennis |
| Dance | Track and Field |
| Flag Football | Volleyball |
| Tackle Football | Wrestling |

Intramural None

Club Rugby

Website

morgan.k12.ga.us/mchs

Contact

Doug Connelly, athletic director,
doug.connelly@morgan.k12.ga.us

Invest in new activities tailored to local interests

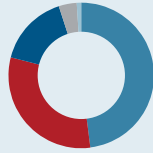
The value of offering outdoor recreation options in rural areas was made clear in the Aspen Institute’s national survey, in which archery was identified by both boys and girls as among the sports they most want to try (see Scoreboard on page 5). Morgan County, which is located near two major lakes, introduced bass fishing as a club and it is now a sanctioned varsity sport. The school’s PE department includes a course in outdoor education, where students learn about fishing, building docks, basic swimming, and lifeguard duty.

Given the cultural significance of football in many rural areas, flag football is increasingly popular among girls. Alabama recently became the fifth state to add the sport in high schools, joining Alaska, Nevada, Florida and Georgia. Morgan County started flag this year with a six-game season that generated student excitement. The school’s digital media class created video commercials to recruit players for flag – a sport that doesn’t need to be confined to girls. As tackle football participation rates drop, flag could be an option to engage boys as well.

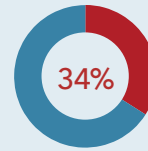
Pender High School | Burgaw, NC



Location



Race/ethnicity



Students who play interscholastic/intramural sports or participate in school clubs involving physical activity

Interscholastic

- | | |
|---------------|-----------------|
| Baseball | Soccer |
| Basketball | Softball |
| Cheerleading | Track and Field |
| Cross Country | Volleyball |
| Football | Wrestling |

Intramural None

- Club
- Dance
 - Strength Training
 - General Fitness Classes

Website

sites.google.com/a/pender.k12.nc.us/phs/

Contact

Matthew Davis, athletic director,
matthew_davis@pender.k12.nc.us

Help athletes come to believe “I matter”

Pender focuses heavily on community service and leadership opportunities for its athletes through a systematic approach of moving students from what it calls “I’m Here” to “I Belong” to “I Matter.” The idea is to help athletes see how they fit within a broader context of their school and community.

The initiative started out as one team with one project and grew into seven teams completing nine projects. Athletes have participated in reading, pen pal and donation projects with local elementary schools, relief work after a hurricane, food drives, stockings for soldiers, and summer camps with kids. Students take the lead on the projects. Pender has won a community service award by the North Carolina High School Athletic Association in four of the past six years.

Growing Sports for Native Americans

“Keepers of the Game” is an award-winning film by The DICK’S Sporting Goods Foundation that celebrates the strength and perseverance

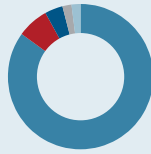
of the Salmon River High School girls lacrosse team, both on the field and in their Native American community.

Watch: tribecafilm.com/studios/keepers-of-the-game

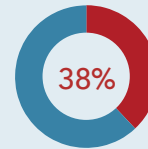
West Stokes High School | King, NC



Location



Race/ethnicity



Students who play interscholastic/intramural sports or participate in school clubs involving physical activity

Interscholastic

- | | |
|---------------|-----------------|
| Baseball | Soccer |
| Basketball | Softball |
| Cheerleading | Swimming |
| Cross Country | Tennis |
| Football | Track and Field |
| Golf | Volleyball |
| Lacrosse | Wrestling |

Intramural None

Club None

Website

west.stokes.k12.nc.us/

Contact

Travis Gammons, athletic director,
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Embrace Unified Sports

Young people with disabilities do not often get a chance to play on their school sports teams. About 1.4 million people worldwide take part in Special Olympics Unified Sports, breaking down stereotypes about people with intellectual disabilities in a fun way.¹⁹ Unified Sports joins people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team, inspired by the idea that training together and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding. More students from rural schools than any other school type say their disability is not accommodated to play sports, according to an Aspen Institute survey.

West Stokes is one of 150 high schools nationally recognized as a Special Olympics Unified Champion School – and one of only four from North Carolina. This distinction means West Stokes plays at least two Unified sport seasons throughout the academic year, has an adult coach trained on Unified, and has a self-sustainable plan to maintain the program financially into the future. “You can see it on these kids’ faces who volunteer to help,” says West Stokes Athletic Director Travis Gammons. “They really enjoy the whole process.”

ENDNOTES

1. Analysis of 2017-18 Civil Rights Data Collection conducted by Resonant Education. The participation rate represents the percentage of roster spots compared to the total population of students that year, rather than the percentage of students who were participating in sports. Some students, of course, participated in more than one sport. For schools which reported single-sex athletics information, there were some omissions of urbanicity and Title I status. However, 81% of urbanicity data and 93% of Title I data were able to be reconciled, and any analysis referring to this information used only complete data entries. Another point of context: In the Aspen Institute's survey of students in 2020-21, 38% of ninth- to 12th-graders in rural schools said they had played at least one season of a sport with a school team, at any point during high school.
2. ["School Sports Decline Symbolizes Rural Towns' Struggle to Survive."](#) Bob Cook, Forbes, October 22, 2016.
3. ["Why Schools are Resisting Consolidating."](#) Katherine Barrett and Richard Greene, Governing.com, Sept. 18, 2014.
4. These participation rates were calculated by the Aspen Institute using [data from the National Federation of State High School Associations](#) from the 2018-19, 2008-09 and 1998-99 academic years. The states with the biggest and smallest rural populations were identified by [Stacker.com](#) in 2019 using U.S. Census data from 2010.
5. [Redefining Rural: Towards a Better Understanding of Geography, Demography and Economy in Rural Places.](#) Economic Innovation Group, March 2021.
6. [Exploring Disparities in School Sports Participation in Rural Pennsylvania.](#) M. Blair Evans; Penn State University, November 2020.
7. [Rural America.](#) U.S. Census Bureau.
8. [Rural Education in America.](#) National Center for Education Statistics.
9. [Why Rural Matters.](#) Rural School and Community Trust, November 2019.
10. [Redefining Rural: Towards a Better Understanding of Geography, Demography and Economy in Rural Places.](#) Economic Innovation Group, March 2021.
11. The Influence of Athletic Trainers on the Incidence and Management of Concussions in High School Athletes. Timothy A. McGuine, Adam Y. Pfaller, Eric G. Post, Scott J. Hetzel, Allison Brooks, Steven P. Broglio; National Athletic Trainers' Association, Journal of Athletic Training, 2018. The researchers determined the level of athletic trainer availability at each school based on the number of athletes the athletic trainer was expected to serve per hour he or she was on site. Using that metric, a school categorized as having a high or low level of athletic trainer availability.
12. [Sport Specialization Characteristics Between Rural and Suburban High School Athletes.](#) David R. Bell, Eric G. Post, Stephanie M. Trigsted; Orthopaedic Journal of Sports Medicine, 2018.
13. ["School Sports Decline Symbolizes Rural Towns' Struggle to Survive."](#) Bob Cook, Forbes, October 22, 2016.
14. [Sport Specialization Characteristics Between Rural and Suburban High School Athletes.](#) David R. Bell, Eric G. Post, Stephanie M. Trigsted; Orthopaedic Journal of Sports Medicine, 2018.
15. Results from Aspen Institute national survey of high school students, September 2020-March 2021. The sample represented students from suburban, rural and urban public schools, charter schools, and private schools.
16. Most of the sports costs come from coaching stipends and contracts (\$212,379), paid for by the Jennings County School Corporation. Additional expenses are for referees (\$30,000), uniforms/equipment (\$18,000), team meals/concessions (\$12,000), transportation (\$10,000), and awards/banquets (\$5,000). The total figure does not include a \$10 million bond used by the corporation to improve athletic facilities over the past three years and \$54,300 spent by Jennings County High School in that period to supplement the projects with smaller improvements.
17. [Jennings County High School Football History.](#) AlamancSports.com.
18. [Distressed Communities Index interactive map.](#) Economic Innovation Group.
19. [Special Olympics Unified Sports website.](#)

CREDITS

Jon Solomon, editorial director of Aspen Sports & Society Program, was principal investigator of this report. Tom Farrey, executive director, edited the report. Staff including Funmi Animashaun, program assistant, provided project management. Members of the Reimaging School Sports Advisory Committee, representing perspectives from education, youth sports, health, academia, government, and philanthropy, contributed to the development of this report.

To learn more visit as.pn/schoolsports

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