



REIMAGINING  
SCHOOL SPORTS

# LARGE URBAN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS



boks



**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/BOKS, 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](https://as.pn/sportsfacts)



Learn more about this project and find all reports at: [as.pn/schoolsports](https://as.pn/schoolsports)

## Challenges and Opportunities: Large Urban Public Schools

Nationally, 63% of urban public high schools offer interscholastic sports, below the rates of rural (73%) and suburban (70%) schools, according to an Aspen Institute-commissioned analysis of 2017-18 Civil Rights Data Collection by Resonant Education.<sup>1</sup> The percentage of urban students who play on high school teams is 33%, also lower than that of rural (42%) and suburban (41%) schools.

In urban settings, many students arrive in high school behind the curve in knowledge and skills of the sport they play. Almost one-third of ninth-grade urban students (32%) said they don't play high school sports because they believe they are not good enough, compared to 23% of ninth-grade suburban students, according to a national survey of high school students by the Aspen Institute.

There is an extreme lack of facility space in many urban areas for safe and secure access to sports. When better facilities and more opportunities for students to play sports are provided, more students are willing to play.<sup>2</sup> "Ultimately, this will begin to shift the common misjudgments by administrators and school leaders that believe the interest levels are low in their schools and districts," wrote James Lynch, president of the Philadelphia Public League, in his dissertation on building a more successful sports model for urban schools.<sup>3</sup>

Urban students are typically exposed to limited sports options. In the Institute's survey, Black urban students were twice as likely as Black rural and suburban students to indicate they don't play high school sports because the sports offered don't interest them. Urban students, especially boys, more often play sports outside of school environments. Yet when offered nontraditional urban sports, some students take advantage. The highest rate of male cross country runners in the survey came from urban schools (18%), not suburban (12%) or rural (9%) communities that offer more land for running.

### Characteristics of Urban Schools

For purposes of this report, the Aspen Institute defines a large urban school as a public school with more than 1,000 students and classifies itself as located in a city/urban area. The National Center for Education Statistics defines a large urban school as one located inside an urbanized area with a population of 250,000 or more. Thirty percent of U.S. public school students are in a city – fewer than in the suburbs (40%) and more than in rural areas (19%) and towns (11%).<sup>4</sup>

About two-thirds of urban students are non-White, and in the 20 largest urban school districts, that figure is 80% on average.<sup>5</sup> Predominantly White school districts enroll just over 1,500 students (half the size of the national average), and predominantly non-White districts serve over 10,000 students (three times more than the national average). Yet for every student enrolled, the average non-White district receives \$2,226 less in funding than a White district.<sup>6</sup> Urban schools also serve an increasing majority of students from disadvantaged households. Urban students (38%) are more likely than suburban (16%) and rural (28%) students to receive free or reduced-price lunch.<sup>7</sup> This means urban students are "likely to be surrounded by adults with low levels of educational attainment and limited professional prospects – a social context that can have a powerful impact on how students approach school and envision their futures."<sup>8</sup>

Basketball carries a well-earned reputation as an urban sport. But fewer urban boys (18%) said they have played high school basketball than boys at rural (28%) and suburban (22%) schools. Urban girls (20%) also played basketball in high school at a lower rate than rural girls (29%). Among all Black students, urban youth (36%) said they played high school basketball less than rural (52%) and suburban (42%) students. Similarly, White urban students (11%) reported lower basketball rates than White rural (25%) and suburban (14%) youth. Hispanic students are even more scarcely found in basketball, especially in urban areas.

It's not that basketball isn't popular. Basketball was among the top 10 sports all urban students said they wish their school offered. This suggests the supply doesn't meet the demand, due in part to lack of money, staffing and gym space to support interest. Several athletic directors said urban schools sometimes can't afford multiple basketball teams, resulting in many students getting cut.

The funding debate over athletics vs. academics can be intense in cities and both sides have valid arguments. Some school leaders argue for the importance of interscholastic athletes and the role they play in creating community within the educational environment.

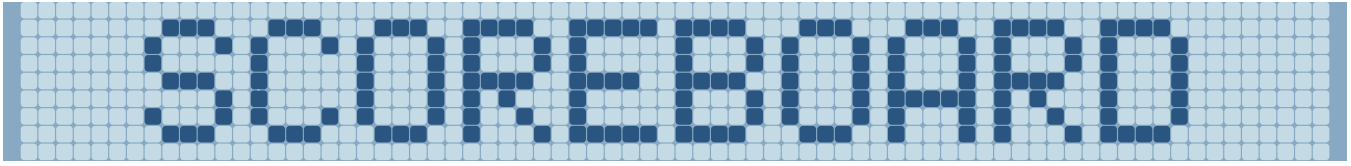


A major reason urban youth play sports is due to relationships with their coach and teammates.<sup>9</sup> Other school leaders argue that with limited funding, they must prioritize keeping funding in classrooms for basic necessities like textbooks, supplies and teachers.

Meanwhile, many male athletes in urban schools have an inflated perspective of their realistic sports expectations, believing they will receive a college sports scholarship, even though the odds are long.<sup>10</sup> Once schools and parents recognize that most students will not play in college, “one can then begin to explore the benefits of a mixed offering of scholastic athletic programs,” Lynch wrote. Ideas in this report can help refresh the high school sports model for urban schools.



## LARGE URBAN 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 urban students told us.












### Top sports urban students play at school

(played at least one full season on a team)











#### Female

	29%	Volleyball
	20%	Soccer
	20%	Basketball
	18%	Track and Field
	11%	Softball
	9%	Tennis
	7%	Golf
	7%	Cheerleading
	5%	Cross Country
	5%	Dance Team

#### Male












	33%	Football
	22%	Soccer
	20%	Track and Field
	19%	Baseball
	18%	Basketball
	18%	Cross Country
	14%	Wrestling
	3%	Flag Football
	3%	Golf
	3%	Lacrosse
	3%	Swimming

#### All










	20%	Soccer
	19%	Basketball
	18%	Track and Field
	16%	Volleyball
	15%	Football
	10%	Cross Country
	9%	Baseball
	7%	Softball
	6%	Tennis
	6%	Wrestling

### Top sports that urban students wish their school offered












#### Female

	14%	Swimming
	12%	Archery
	11%	Gymnastics
	6%	Badminton
	6%	Bowling
	5%	Dance Team
	4%	Skiing
	4%	Volleyball
	4%	Lacrosse
	4%	Cheerleading
	4%	Ice Hockey

#### Male









	12%	Archery
	11%	Weightlifting
	7%	Lacrosse
	7%	Bowling
	6%	Basketball
	5%	Badminton
	5%	Swimming
	5%	Ice Hockey
	5%	Ultimate Frisbee

#### All









	13%	Archery
	10%	Swimming
	7%	Gymnastics
	6%	Badminton
	6%	Lacrosse
	6%	Weightlifting
	6%	Bowling
	4%	Basketball
	4%	Skiing
	4%	Volleyball
	4%	Ice Hockey

## Other physical activities urban students want to try









### Female

	33%	Yoga
	32%	Dance
	25%	Strength Training
	23%	Skateboarding
	22%	Biking
	19%	General Fitness Classes
	19%	Climbing
	16%	Outdoor Recreation

### Male

	46%	Strength Training
	23%	Biking
	22%	Climbing
	19%	Parkour
	17%	General Fitness Classes
	16%	Skateboarding
	15%	Outdoor Recreation
	13%	Adventure Racing

### All

	34%	Strength Training
	22%	Biking
	21%	Yoga
	20%	Dance
	20%	Climbing
	20%	Skateboarding
	18%	General Fitness Classes
	15%	Outdoor Recreation

## Why urban students play sports

Reason	Female	Male	All
Have fun	81%	77%	80%
Exercise	79%	76%	78%
Learn and improve skills	67%	65%	66%
Playing with and making new friends	60%	60%	60%
Competing	50%	60%	54%
Winning games/championships	44%	60%	51%
Emotional/mental health	52%	37%	45%
College scholarships	43%	43%	43%
Improve college applications	45%	36%	41%
Making my family proud	32%	41%	37%
Getting away from problems	37%	33%	35%

## What prevents urban students from playing sports

Reason	Female	Male	All
Too much schoolwork	49%	36%	43%
I don't enjoy sports	33%	23%	30%
No offered sports interest me	26%	27%	26%
Didn't try out/not good enough	26%	21%	24%
Family responsibilities	24%	15%	21%
Work schedule	17%	19%	17%
I don't feel welcome	12%	10%	12%
Fear of injury/illness	12%	9%	11%
My friends don't play	11%	11%	11%
Too expensive	11%	4%	8%
Transportation challenges	8%	6%	8%



WINNER: LARGE URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

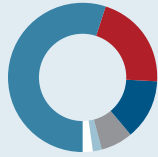


# Harding High School

St. Paul, MN

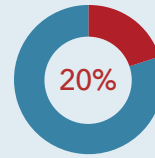


Location

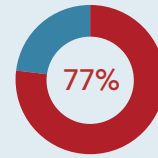


Race/ethnicity

- Asian (55%)
- Black (21%)
- Hispanic (13%)
- White (7%)
- American Indian (2%)
- Other (2%)



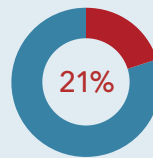
Disability



Free/reduced lunch

Sports program costs: **\$449,924<sup>13</sup>**

Percentage of total school costs: **3.6%**



Students who play interscholastic/intramural sports or participate in school clubs involving physical activity (out of 1,854 students)

### Interscholastic

- |                      |               |            |                 |
|----------------------|---------------|------------|-----------------|
| Adapted Bowling      | Baseball      | Gymnastics | Swimming        |
| Adapted Floor Hockey | Basketball    | Ice Hockey | Tennis          |
| Adapted Soccer       | Cross Country | Lacrosse   | Track and Field |
| Adapted Softball     | Football      | Soccer     | Volleyball      |
| Badminton            | Golf          | Softball   | Wrestling       |

### Intramural

None

### Club

- Cheerleading
- Flag Football
- Weight Training

Website  
[spps.org/harding](http://spps.org/harding)

Contact **Kathy Jackson**, Athletic Director  
[kathleen.jackson@spps.org](mailto:kathleen.jackson@spps.org)



OUR WINNING SCHOOL RECEIVES  
**\$20,000 AWARD**

COURTESY OF



## WINNER'S INNOVATION / HARDING HIGH SCHOOL

## Meet Diverse Athletes Where They're at

Hay Blu Day has heard many stories about her life in a refugee camp in Thailand, where she was born and lived for four years. The accounts provided to her by family members usually involve violence and sadness. Day remembers only one personal memory: American soldiers arriving in a tank while she returned to her house because she was thirsty.

Day is a member of the Karen (pronounced k'REN) people, an ethnic minority from the nation of Burma (also known as Myanmar). Karen refugees, who fled oppression from the Burmese government, began arriving in Minnesota in the early 2000s. St. Paul has the largest U.S. population of Karen people and Hmong people, an ethnic group inhabiting southeastern China and northern parts of Vietnam, Laos and Thailand who first arrived in Minnesota in 1975.

At Harding High School, where Day attended, more than half of the population is Hmong and 38 different languages are spoken by students. Fifteen percent are English Language Learners who experienced interrupted education due to war, civil unrest, migration or other factors. Most parents of Harding students have no cultural history with sports and understandably prioritize putting food on the table through hard-working jobs and ensuring their child is educated, says Harding Principal Be Vang, a first-generation Hmong.

Day says she and many students don't feel connected to their parents – "It's academics and only academics" – so they play sports as a distraction from their home lives. She hid injuries from her parents, including concussions, because telling them could have meant debates over playing sports. She never wanted to lose the adrenaline of sports, especially badminton – a popular sport at Harding and one that urban students



nationally identified in the Aspen Institute survey as a sport they want to try.

"I feel like I'm alone when I play, in the sense I'm at peace," says Day, who played badminton, volleyball and soccer before graduating in 2021. "There's nothing to really worry about. You have teammates wanting the same thing as you. There's no confusion of anything. You just play the sport."

Harding recognizes these cultural differences among its students, and the challenges and opportunities to engage them with very limited resources. For its ability to adapt a sports model that tries to meet students where they're at, Harding is recognized as the Aspen Institute's Project Play winner in the Large Urban Schools category of our Reimagining School Sports initiative.

Harding offers sports based on what students want. This includes embracing exploding soccer growth among its Latino and Somali populations (95 soccer players before COVID-19) and net sports popular with Asian students (46 badminton players, 41 tennis players, 37 volleyball players). Although boys volleyball is not funded by the St. Paul school district or sanctioned by the state, Harding provides a club volleyball team for boys because of the huge demand.





“I have to scrape for money, volunteer coaches and gym time,” says Harding Athletic Director Kathy Jackson, who expects to use some of the Reimagining School Sports \$20,000 award to fund boys volleyball. “We’re working at the district level to try to fund boys volleyball, but if you add something, something gets taken away. And then all of the other St. Paul high schools will feel pressured to offer it, and they have more gym-space limitations than I do.”

Swimming has gained popularity among Hmong students at Harding. Of the eight girls on the team during COVID-19, seven were Hmong. Jackson has a theory why: Swimming is a quiet and private sport at Harding with fewer participants than other sports. To stay safe during the pandemic, the swimmers voted to only participate in virtual meets at their pool, rather than traveling.

“I don’t see a lot of Hmong people in Harding sports,” says junior Kalani Yang, who developed a love of golf from her dad and became a rare Hmong student to qualify for the Minnesota state golf championship. “I wish they could join a sport so they can see the long-term friendships you make but it’s OK if they don’t. I think joining a sport really helped me get out of my comfort zone.”

Sports participation by Harding students regularly occur in starts and stops, even during seasons. Some need to care for siblings, parents or grandparents.

Some need jobs to make money. Jackson estimates 40% of Harding athletes work during their sport season and 60% do so in their offseason.

“I can count a lot faster the number of times we’ve had every kid who signed up for football appear at practice than the number of times we have kids missing,” says football coach Otto Kraus, whose team ended a 28-game losing streak in 2021.

Every year, Kraus cautions his new coaches against taking a hard line by tying practice attendance to playing time in games. He understands why football is not a priority for many Harding families, who face accessibility challenges he never had growing up. Most of his players are on their own to register for the season, remember when practices start, and find a way to get there.

“Using playing time as a punishment is out for us,” Kraus says. “Truthfully, it has to be individual relationships with the kids and understand why they’re missing practice. Dealing with missed practices here takes a lot of patience and conversations to make sure it’s fair, but fair doesn’t always mean equal.”

Still, getting students to play football is a struggle. Many parents fear injuries – and even the principal worries about safety because Hmong people generally are small in stature. When Kraus arrived four years ago, there were 22 returning players. That eventually grew to 65 before COVID-19 reduced participation to 35.



For the 2021 season, Harding has merged football programs with Humboldt High School, which almost disbanded its team. As of early June 2021, 40 players between the schools had registered – four times more than Harding usually signed up on its own by that time. Kraus says he’s optimistic of reaching 65.

This might be the last chance to save football at Harding. The demographics have changed, with those who played tackle football now moving to the suburbs while more refugees live in the city. From 2000 to 2020, St. Paul’s White population decreased from 67% to 57%, while Hispanic/Latino residents doubled from 8% to 19% and the Asian population increased from 12% to 19%.<sup>14</sup>

St. Paul’s feeder tackle programs are dying even as flag football thrives with the Hmong community. Flag is an intramural sport at Harding played by about 50 students. Some local middle schools offer flag. And it’s a popular sport at the annual Hmong International Freedom Festival in St. Paul. For many years, the Hmong community has self-organized a flag football league for adults and some youth.

“

**My coaches were always very open to communicate when I was feeling upset or emotional about the situation. They’d talk with me and explain why I might be feeling that way.**

Emmanuel Hawkins, Harding High School Football Player

”

“We’ll be holding (tackle) practice with 35 guys and griping that we need more players, and next door there are 40 to 50 kids playing flag,” says Kraus, whose team hosts an annual flag tournament to show support. “Early on, I fell into this trap of telling them, ‘Come play football and play for your school,’ but I’ve changed my thinking on it. I get it if you’re a 100-pounder, you can have a great time playing flag with awesome running, catching and agility skills. When you line up against a 200-pound linebacker, it’s not the same sport.”

Hmong families “absolutely are sending a message of what they want,” Jackson says. “At some point, the conversation has to be, why are we continuing to offer tackle football? But that’s a really strong tradition in America. And if we had a flag football team at Harding, who would we play? The structure is not in place.”

Off the fields and courts, Harding athletes are encouraged to talk openly about a traumatic 2020-21 school year for students of color, with the murder of George Floyd in nearby Minneapolis and anti-Asian violence happening around the country due to the COVID-19 pandemic that originated in China. “Every day when I open my phone I see new violence against Asians,” says Lang, the student golfer. “It’s difficult to read. I want to do something about it.”

Twenty-one percent of Harding students are Black, slightly higher than the city population of 16%. Many live near where protests and riots happened after Floyd was murdered by a police officer. “I have a family member close to (Floyd), so we kind of knew who he was and it hurt a little more,” says Emmanuel Hawkins, a senior football player who is Black. “My coaches were always very open to communicate when I was feeling upset or emotional about the situation. They’d talk with me and explain why I might be feeling that way.”

Alisia Lemmons, a five-sport athlete during the pandemic who is half Mexican and half White, says the racial turmoil caused her to self-reflect on coaches she had in middle school who were biased toward White athletes.

Lemmons says Harding’s predominantly Black high school girls basketball team, led by a White coach, created spaces for hard but valuable discussions.

“Our coach really talks about how each of us should have pride in our ethnic background, culture and identity, and we shouldn’t change just because society tells us to,” Lemmons says. “He says we’re the generation of change. I’ve heard that so many times over the past year from so many people. I believe it 100%.”

Harding is not perfect. Several students say that while they love many coaches and believe they truly care about their athletes, they wish the coaching staff was more diverse and adaptable to individual student needs. Only 5% of the coaches are from a racial or ethnic minority.

“  
**Our coach really talks about how each of us should have pride in our ethnic background, culture and identity.**

Alisia Lemmons, Harding High School Basketball Player

“Right before a (badminton) match, I get in a mode where I look really down and I don’t feel as good, but then I play my best,” Day says. “The coaches don’t understand that, but another person who helps our team realized that and said don’t worry about it, just do what I’m doing. With athletes who have language barriers, some coaches tend to go nicer on them than English-speaking students. Sometimes you have to push a player if you want them to do their best.”

The Aspen Institute selected Harding despite a relatively low number of students participating in sports programs – just 21%, below the national average of 33% for urban schools. For all of its exemplary efforts amid an array of challenges, there remains room for growth, for creating the conditions to engage more students.



Day says she wishes more parents would let their children play sports. Vang, the school principal, says Hmong parents are slowly doing so. St. Paul’s Sunisa Lee recently qualified for the Tokyo Games as the first Hmong-American Olympic gymnast – a byproduct of Hmong Minnesotans now in their 40s fighting for access to sports.<sup>15</sup> Still, Vang says, many parents don’t view sports as an added benefit tied to education. These parents can’t be forced to change their perspective, she says, especially not by White coaches or teachers who may lack an understanding of cultural barriers and obligations.

“It can come off as, ‘I know your child best,’” Vang says. “I tell parents, just go to one of your kids’ sports, even though we don’t understand the games. Just see the excitement they have on the field.”

“But our parents are such hard workers, and often times, they don’t have the flexibility to leave a job for a couple hours for a game at 3 pm. The structure of sports should change if we want more parents to come, especially in high-poverty, urban areas, to integrate their values into athletics.”

## Get Kids Moving

BOKS is a free physical activity program for kids of all ages and abilities. The BOKS program includes lesson plans, training, and support needed to get kids moving for up to 45 minutes a day. It also includes shorter movement breaks, games, and activities tailored to the needs of an educator or parent.

Learn more at [bokskids.org](http://bokskids.org)

## HONOR ROLL IDEAS

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

### Intentionally promote transformational coaching

When new coaches are hired at Harding High School, Athletic Director Kathy Jackson provides them with a book she wants them to read: "InsideOutCoaching: How Sports Can Transform Lives." The book, which has been used by the Minnesota State High School League to train coaches, emphasizes the need to be a transformational coach to change students' lives rather than being a transactional coach just trying to win games.

### Embrace adapted sports

In 1992, Minnesota became the first state to officially sanction adapted sports by a state high school league. Today, St. Paul Public Schools, the district for Harding High School, has an adapted sports athletic director and runs bowling, floor hockey, soccer and softball. These are usually co-op teams in the city and divided based on whether a student has a physical or cognitive impairment, with one practice and two games per week. Harding had 16 bowlers before COVID-19.

### Make registering for sports easier

The registration process can be a nightmare in urban areas, where families have less time to complete documents or, in some cases, can't read the documents. Extensive paperwork from the Minnesota State High School League changes every year and much of the legalese is difficult for students or their families to understand, Jackson says. Harding is in the process of creating a cheat sheet with registration information that is translated into Hmong, Somali, Spanish and Karen.

## Tool for School Leaders

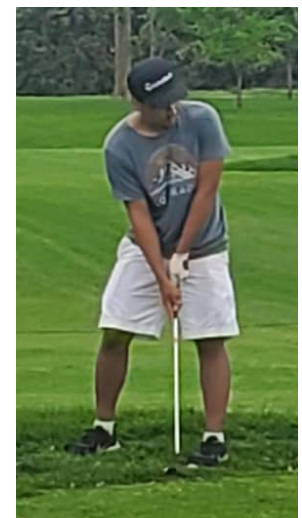
Did you know: Girls on average wait about two more years to start specializing in basketball than boys. Many studies show early specialization can lead to overuse injuries and burnout. Learn more in the Healthy Sport Index, a data-driven project of the Aspen Institute and Hospital for Special Surgery that analyzes the relative benefits and risks of playing each sport.

Visit [healthysportindex.com](https://healthysportindex.com)



Healthy Sport Index

Powered By  HOSPITAL FOR SPECIAL SURGERY



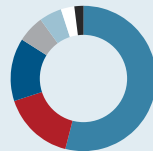
## MORE HONOR ROLL IDEAS

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

### John R. Rogers High School | Spokane, WA

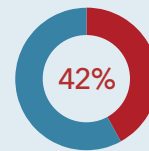


Location



Race/ethnicity

- White (54%)
- Two or more races (16%)
- Hispanic (14%)
- Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander (6%)
- Black (5%)
- Asian (3%)
- American Indian/Alaskan Native (2%)



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

#### Interscholastic

- ⚾ Baseball
- 🏀 Basketball
- 👯 Cheerleading
- 🏊 Cross Country
- 💃 Dance
- ⚽ Football
- 💡 Golf
- 🤸 Gymnastics
- ⚽ Soccer
- ⚾ Softball
- 🎾 Tennis
- 🏃 Track and Field
- 🏀 Unified Basketball
- ⚽ Unified Soccer
- ⚾ Unified Softball
- 🏐 Volleyball
- 🤼 Wrestling

#### Intramural

- 🏸 Badminton
- 🎳 Bowling
- 🏏 Disc Golf

#### Club

- 🎿 Skiing
- ⊕ Sports Medicine

#### Develop a no-cut policy and stick to it

It sounds simple but avoiding cuts is one of the easiest ways to increase sports participation. In Aaron Brecek’s four years as John R. Rogers High School athletic director, he says there have intentionally been no cuts on any teams. Basketball was the only sport in danger of cuts. Brecek convinced his school district to provide additional funding for a third, less-competitive basketball team since John R. Rogers doesn’t use all of its football funding. Intramural sports (badminton, bowling, disc golf) also help meet the sports needs of students.

In 2011, the school’s graduation rate was 43%; 10 years later, that increased to 88%. “Our whole philosophy is to get kids to graduation,” Brecek says. “We know that by keeping kids involved in activities like sports, their chances are going to improve to graduate, and their GPA and school attendance will be better.”

#### Website

[spokaneschools.org/domain/127](http://spokaneschools.org/domain/127)

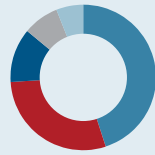
#### Contact

Aaron Brecek, athletic director, [aaronbr@spokaneschools.org](mailto:aaronbr@spokaneschools.org)

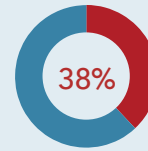
## Richwoods High School | Peoria, IL



Location



Race/ethnicity



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

### Interscholastic

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

### Intramural

- Ultimate Frisbee
- Volleyball

### Club

- Biking
- ROTC
- Strength Training

### Website

[peoriapublicschools.org/richwoods](http://peoriapublicschools.org/richwoods)

### Contact

**Ron Dwyer**, athletics and activities director,  
[ronald.dwyer@psd150.org](mailto:ronald.dwyer@psd150.org)

### Utilize ROTC to encourage physical fitness

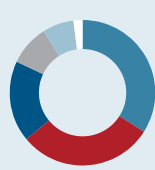
Richwoods, a school of 1,300 students in a poor community with increasing violence, doubled its number of ROTC participants to 200. How? Instead of simply viewing ROTC as a drill team with rifles and marching, it became a physical fitness program under the new director, retired Marine Shawn Martin. There are sprints, long-distance runs, pull-ups, sit-ups, weight-lifting and rope climbing. Students can choose between taking physical education or joining ROTC for school credit.

“The kids come out (to ROTC) because when a lot of them gain confidence as their bodies change, they’re proud and they tell their friends, so it spreads like wildfire,” says Athletic Director Ron Dwyer, who credits ROTC with the growth of his girls wrestling team. “They’re all pulling for each other. No one is talking down to anyone.” Dwyer plans to create more integration between ROTC and the athletic department. “They grow leaders. That’s one thing we’re missing, especially in our male sports.”

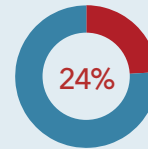
## South Side High School | Fort Wayne, IN



Location



Race/ethnicity



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

### Interscholastic

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

Intramural      None

- Club
- Cheerleading
  - Powerlifting

### Website

[fortwayneschools.org/SouthSide](https://fortwayneschools.org/SouthSide)

### Contact

**Torrey Curry**, athletic director,  
[torrey.curry@fwcs.k12.in.us](mailto:torrey.curry@fwcs.k12.in.us)

### Get creative for athletes to take physicals

One major barrier for urban students to play sports: Many families have no health insurance for the child’s required physical. Most families at South Side High School receive one free wellness check per calendar year, but the documentation is not accepted as an athletic physical. This forces low-income families to pay for a second doctor visit they can’t afford, so some children simply don’t play sports.

South Side found a workaround by asking the right questions to cut through bureaucracy. The athletic department learned that the local Ronald McDonald House would provide a free wellness check on the athletic physical form and the school – not the school district, as originally thought – could arrange this setup. South Side schedules the bus to appear in the school parking lot. Coaches instruct parents how to register online. Eight students used the bus for their athletic physical in 2021, the first year this occurred, and more are expected in the future.

## 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.
2. [The Association of School Environments with Youth Physical Activity](#), National Library of Medicine, April 2001. James F. Sallis, Terry L. Conway, Judith J. Prochaska, Thomas L. McKenzie, Simon Marshall, M. Brown.
3. Building a Successful Model for Scholastic Athletics in Urban Schools: A Collective Case Study, James Patrick Lynch, Drexel University, May 2020.
4. [Selected Statistics from the Public Elementary and Secondary Education Universe: School Year 2015–16](#), National Center for Education Statistics.
5. [Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Minorities](#), National Center for Education Statistics.
6. [Non-White School Districts Get \\$23 Billion Less than White Districts Despite Serving the Same Number of Students](#), EdBuild, 2019.
7. [Urban Schools: The Challenge of Location and Poverty](#), National Center for Education Statistics.
8. “[The Urban-School Stigma](#),” The Atlantic, Aug. 25, 2017.
9. [Minority Youth Participation in an Organized Sport Program: Needs, Motivations, and Facilitators](#), 2014. Monika Stodolska, Iryna Sharajevska, Scott Tanisky, Allison Ryan.
10. [Sport Participation in an Urban High School: Academic and Psychologic Correlates](#), 1996. M. Fisher, L. Juszczak, S.B. Friedman.
11. Analysis of 2017-18 Civil Rights Data Collection conducted by Resonant Education.
12. Results from the Aspen Institute national survey of high school students, September 2020-March 2021. The same represented students from urban, suburban and rural public high schools, charter schools, and private schools.
13. Information was provided by Harding High School and St. Paul Public Schools District. Most of the sports costs come from coaching stipends and contracts (\$327,000). Additional expenses are for officials/event workers (\$41,000), athletic trainer salary (\$35,000), transportation (\$21,424), uniforms/equipment (\$13,000), Minnesota State High School League dues (\$10,000), and awards/banquets (\$2,500).
14. U.S. Census Bureau data from 2000 and 2020.
15. [“A Historic Moment for Our Community’: Hmong Minnesotans Revel in Sunisa Lee’s Olympic Journey.”](#) MPRnews, July 13, 2021.

## CREDITS

Jon Solomon, editorial director of the 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 Reimagining School Sports Advisory Committee, representing perspectives from education, youth sports, health, academia, government, and philanthropy, contributed to the development of this report. Photos were provided by Harding High School, John R. Rogers High School, Richwoods High School and South Side High School..

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