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Report Highlights

1 in 7 parents whose children did not play middle or high school sports in 2013-14 cited cost as the reason for not participating.

Only 30% of lower-income parents report their child participates in middle or high school sports, compared to 51% of higher-income parents.

Over 60% of children who play school sports had an athletic pay-to-play fee; 18% paid more than \$200.

Pay-to-Play Sports Keeping Some Kids on the Sidelines

Due to budget constraints, many school districts charge fees for students who participate in sports at the middle or high school level. Often called “pay-to-play” fees, these may be charged as a flat amount per year, a flat amount per sport, or a variable charge by sport.

In June 2014, the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children in middle or high school (age 12-17 years) about participation fees for school sports.

Participation in School Sports by Family Income

Overall, 42% of parents report that at least one child participated in middle or high school sports during the 2013-14 school year, with substantial differences based on household income. Only 30% of lower-income families (<\$60,000 per year) have a teen playing school sports, compared to 51% among families earning ≥\$60,000 per year.

Twelve percent of parents report that the cost of school sports has caused a decrease in participation for at least one of their children, with more lower-income parents noting this trend (15% vs 9%). Notably, 14% of parents whose children did not play school sports at all during the 2013-14 school year cited cost as the reason for non-participation.

Participation Fees for School Sports

The average cost for school athletic fees was \$126 per participating child. Overall, 62% of sports participants paid a fee of some amount, with 18% paying \$200 or more; differences by income are shown in Figure 1. Twelve percent of lower-income parents and 3% of higher-income parents reported receiving a fee waiver. In addition to participation fees, parents reported an average of \$275 in equipment, travel, and other sports-related items, yielding an average overall cost of \$401 per child for sports participation.

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Figure 1. School Sports Participation Fees for Kids 12-17 Years, by Household Income

	Sports Participation Fee				Sports Participation
	\$0	\$1-\$99	\$100-\$199	≥\$200	
Household Income <\$60,000	46%	30%	10%	14%	Sports Participation
Household Income ≥\$60,000	35%	22%	24%	19%	

Source: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, 2015.

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by GfK Custom Research, LLC (GfK), for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital via a method used in many published studies. The survey was administered in June 2014 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults age 18 and older from GfK's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. Responses from parents with a child 12-17 (n=755) were used for this report. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 53% among parent panel members contacted to participate. The margin of error is ± 3 to 9 percentage points and higher among subgroups.

Implications

School sports offer children an opportunity to improve their physical fitness, develop teamwork and problem-solving skills, enhance their self-confidence, and establish a meaningful connection with their school. These results from the National Poll on Children's Health indicate that the high cost of school sports is limiting children's opportunities to reap these benefits.

This poll found that middle and high school students from households earning <\$60,000/year participate in school sports at substantially lower rates than their higher-income peers – a disparity consistent with our previous National Poll on Children's Health ([May 2012](#)). In fact, sports participation among lower-income students decreased by 10% from our 2012 report. The impact of cost is further seen in the 15% of lower-income parents who reported that they decreased their child's sports participation, such as limiting the number of sports played.

Many school districts work to minimize the decrease in participation by offering fee waivers for students in low-income families. In this poll, waivers for sports participation fees were received by 12% of lower-income sports participants – certainly helpful to those families, but still not enough to offset the participation declines among lower-income students.

Of note, nearly 10% of parents from higher-earning households (≥\$60,000 per year) reported a decrease in sports participation due to cost – nearly double the rate found in 2012. Moreover, only 3% of this group received a waiver for participation fees. This presents a challenge to schools that base participation fee waivers on eligibility for income-based programs (e.g., Medicaid, free or reduced lunch), which may exclude working families who earn too much for program eligibility but not enough to afford the additional cost of sports fees.

A unique finding from this Poll is among parents whose children did not participate in school sports during the 2013-14 school year, 1 in 7 cited cost as the reason for discontinuing sports. Many school athletic administrators struggle to balance the reality of budget constraints – and the push to charge participation fees – with the risk of losing students from the athletic program. This poll documents that the risk is very real.

Sports participation fees can create the expectation that a student is guaranteed a certain amount of playing time, particularly at the high school level; this is suggested by the common term “pay-to-play” fee. As fees increase, parents may have increased expectations about playing time; both coaches and athletic administrators must be prepared to address these concerns.

The key message is that schools should continue to work to minimize the negative impact of sports participation fees by communicating the rationale for participation fees, ensuring that low-income families are aware of waiver options, and developing options for children who do not meet waiver criteria but are at risk of dropping out of sports.

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