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Survey Indicates Fewer Schools Assessing Participation Fees; Fees Less Than Expected

EAST LANSING, Mich. – Oct. 14 – The results of a recently completed survey of Michigan High School Athletic Association member schools indicates fewer schools are charging smaller fees to participate in interscholastic athletics than was feared earlier this year when schools began contemplating the use of participation fees in response to budget-cutting considerations.

The survey was conducted of the MHSAA's 759 member senior high and 355 junior high/middle schools during the month of September. It revealed that of the 558 senior high schools responding 23 percent were assessing some kind of fee for participation in athletics of \$20 or more; and of the 172 junior high/middle schools responding, 25 percent were utilizing fees. In the last participation fee survey of MHSAA member schools in 1993, 17 percent of 572 senior high respondents and 15 percent of 338 junior high/middle school members responding were assessing fees.

Of the 126 senior high schools responding that they were assessing fees for the current school year, only 31 indicated they were doing so for the first time. At the junior high/middle school level, 19 of 43 schools responding were doing so for the first time.

The fees being assessed are more moderate than originally expected. At the high school level, of the 82 schools responding with a standardized fee per sport, 73 were charging less than \$100. Of 41 schools with a one-time annual fee to student-athletes, 36 were charging \$100 or less. Twenty-nine of the 43 junior high/middle schools survey respondents assessing fees were doing so on a standardized per sport basis at less than \$100 per sport, and of the remaining 14 schools charging a flat annual fee, all were \$100 or less.

“The basic message we’re getting from this feedback is that after all of the predictions of widespread participation fee use and fees that would rival those we’ve heard of in other states in the hundreds of dollars to play a single sport, schools realized the such fees should be avoided in general, and when implemented, be as low as possible,” said John E. “Jack” Roberts, executive director of the MHSAA. “The truth is that

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participation fees reduce participation on the part of young people, they never raise the amount of money they're projected to raise, and there are more sensible and defensible alternatives to fees.

“We also feel that in these days of schools of choice, that a number of schools saw that losing students to neighboring districts not charging participation fees was a financial hurdle they didn't want to go over.”

Roberts also expressed his concern about the effect of participation fees on the role of sports programs in schools.

“One thing that has distinguished school sports – educational athletics – from community and other youth sports programs for years is that school sports have been, for the most part, free to participate in. If participation fees continue to grow in use, then the line becomes blurred between our educational programs and other youth sports programs where teaching youngsters lifetime values may not be a priority. It will raise the question as to why schools should provide these programs. I fear that we are a generation away from schools losing control of extracurricular athletic programs to outside groups, and when that happens, we will lose a powerful tool for motivating young people to stay in school and do well in school and for rallying community support around our school programs in general.”

Roberts added that the MHSAA will continue to advocate for fee-less educational athletic programs, and will continue to provide resources and counsel to schools on the topic of participation fees. Last spring, the MHSAA provided schools the publication, “A Participation Fee Primer” and a companion PowerPoint presentation; resources which are still available on the Administration page of the Association's Web site, along with the complete results of the participation fee survey.

The MHSAA is a private, not-for-profit corporation of voluntary membership by over 1,200 public and private senior high schools and junior high/middle schools which exists to develop common rules for athletic eligibility and competition. No government funds or tax dollars support the MHSAA, which was the first such association nationally to not accept membership dues or tournament entry fees from schools. Member schools which enforce these rules are permitted to participate in MHSAA tournaments, which attract approximately 1.6 million spectators each year.

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