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# Playing It Safe in Secondary School Athletic Programs

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# Playing It Safe in Secondary School Athletic Programs

School business officials play a critical role in ensuring that district assets are protected and that students and staff have a safe environment in which to learn and work. In their role as risk managers, school business officials work closely with the board of education and fellow administrators to identify and track potential risks, develop plans to mitigate those risks, and perform regular risk assessments to determine how risks have changed.

Some risks are inherent in all school systems. For example, students on the playground, buses on the roads, chemicals in the science labs, even food in the cafeteria pose some kind of risk, yet they are part of the daily operations of a school.

Another area that is common to most schools and can pose a threat to the health and safety of students and adults alike is the athletic program in secondary schools. The

general belief that participation in interscholastic athletic programs is a positive component of a well-rounded education has contributed to the increase in sports programming offered at the secondary school level, and that has, in turn, increased the possibility of injuries, liability claims, and litigation. Thus, it is essential that school business officials develop programs, policies, and procedures that help the school system anticipate and manage risk.

In their book *Risk Management Manual for Sport and Recreation Organizations*, Ian McGregor and Joseph MacDonald (2002) identify four key areas of risk management: people (athletes, coaches, and fans), facilities and equipment, policies and procedures, and the emergency response plan. This brief article examines risk management as it relates to facilities used for middle-level and high school athletic programs.



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By David Dolph, Ph.D.

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## Identifying Risk

School business officials share in the responsibility of providing safe facilities for school athletic programs. The first step in meeting this responsibility is to assess the potential risks and hazards associated with the athletic facilities.

Working closely with administrators, coaches, players, facility maintenance personnel, parents, community members, and insurance experts, school business officials can lead a detailed review of sports-related facilities and adjacent grounds, including playing fields, gymnasiums, tennis and basketball courts, sports equipment, spectator areas, walkways, and parking lots. Traffic patterns should also be assessed to identify any potential risks, such as blind spots, inadequate signage, or insufficient pedestrian pathways.

## Managing Risk

Once stakeholders have identified areas of potential risk, they should prioritize them in order of probability and severity of risk and then develop policies and procedures geared toward managing those identified risks. These policies and procedures should cover topics such as timetables for facility inspection, maintenance procedures by qualified personnel, and proper training of everyone associated with the sports program, including administrators, coaches, teachers, staff, and facility supervisors. Policies should identify supervision personnel and describe how and when facilities will be supervised.

The purchase, installation, assembly, and maintenance of equipment that becomes part of facilities also should be considered. A prime example is the purchase and installation of bleachers. The quality and design of bleachers must be adequate for the intended use. Proper assembly and installation also are a critical part of the risk management process, as is development of an inspection schedule by trained or certified personnel.

Risk management may mean eliminating elements of the athletic program that contribute to the risk. For example, removing run-down bleachers or adding lights to a dimly lit parking lot can help eliminate risks. Eliminating specific sports from the athletic program is also a possibility, but should be done only after careful research and input from the district and the community. For example, eliminating the gymnastics program because the equipment is inadequate or unsafe and funds are not currently available for upgrades is a way to manage risk.

## Transferring Risk

Transferring risk is another aspect of risk management. Risk transfer means that the financial burden of the risk is transferred to another entity—typically an insurance company.

School business officials should have a good working relationship with the school district's underwriter to ensure sufficient protection for school district assets, personnel, students, and all those who use the school athletic facilities. School insurance providers can be a good source of information and direction in the areas of risk protection, reduction, and mitigation. A word of caution, however: Although insurance providers can be highly qualified and informed, their guidance should not be construed as legal advice. Leave that to qualified attorneys who are familiar with the laws associated with risk management issues.

## Communication and Enforcement

Two other issues that school business officials should consider when dealing with facilities are risk management communication and enforcement.

Board policies and practices must be thoroughly and continuously communicated to all constituents. Communication can be in the form of announcements, newsletters, policy documents, signage, and the spoken word.

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Enforcing policies related to facility use is important. If school boards have precluded facilities from being used for anything other than interscholastic athletics, then community members should not be allowed to use them for personal recreation. Ignoring policies and procedures is a sure way to increase risk potential.

## Conclusion

School business officials play a vital role in ensuring that athletic facilities are safe and in prime playing condition. The best way to do that is to practice vigilant risk management techniques that include analysis, policy development, training, communication, and enforcement as cornerstones of the process. ■

## Reference

McGregor, I., and J. MacDonald. 2000. *Risk management manual for sport and recreational organizations*. 2nd ed. Corvallis, Ore.: National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association.

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