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Men’s Sport Privilege: Flying ...

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Across the United States, school districts face dwindling state aid, increased costs, and layoffs. Voters are deciding on hard-times budgets and school administrators are making do with fewer resources. As the recession and slow economic recovery play out in American schools and communities, a new wave of gender inequalities has emerged. One sociological tenet contends that in times of economic hardship social inequalities tend to grow more marked rather than diminish. When resources are meager, elites become more assertive and the group in power tends to feel even more entitled than in times of plenty. These dynamics appear to be playing out in relation to gender equity in high school sports.

A few months ago the National Women’s Law Center (NWLC) filed formal administrative complaints with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights against twelve U.S. school districts (including New York City, Chicago, and Houston) for failing to provide high school girls with same access to sports as boys. Marcia Greenberger, the co-president of the NWLC, said that these cities represent the “tip of the iceberg” of school districts that are backsliding with regard to the gender equity requirements of Title IX. The emerging evidence documents that, while more girls participate in high school sports than ever before, the pace of progress toward equity may be slowing or even reversing

itself.

Here's a specific example of this trend from western New York retold to me by a school administrator. Due to budget cutbacks, the suburban school leadership eliminated both the boys' and girls' hockey teams. However, the boys' team was reinstated at a school board meeting. During a subsequent staff meeting, the female administrator questioned the Assistant Superintendent about the ethics of the decision. She pointed to the girls and their parents who were being pushed out at the expense of the boys, and she expressed concerns about possible litigation or legal problems. He replied, "Wait and see if anybody notices. This is what we're doing."

I wonder just who the "we" are in the Assistant Superintendent's declaration. His language expresses a political license that appears to be based in a patriarchal presumption that men (and boys) are entitled to make decisions in sport on behalf of men and at the expense of women. The use of the "we" is also shored up by the hockey subculture in southern Ontario and western New York, which holds a level of prominence similar to the Academy Awards in Hollywood. It is men who carry the sticks, make the hits, and prove their manhood in hockey, while girls and women are either excluded or labeled as interlopers on the ice. The Assistant Superintendent's "we" does not appear to recognize the developmental and educational value of hockey as an athletic activity that can engage both boys and girls in team play, foster the growth of physical skills and competitive zeal, encourage family interaction, and inspire young people to excel as student-athletes.

Finally, the Assistant School Superintendent's attitude tacitly and tactically assumes that male privilege in sport is, if not above the law, off the radar screen of legal enforcement. It's OK to break the law if you don't get caught—a fine educational principle. I hope that the NWLC identifies his district as a 13th offender soon. Western New York legislators, educators, policymakers, and parents would be sure to notice. Title IX is a federal law—our law—that promises equity for all high school students regardless of their gender. Enforce the law. "We" does not equal elite males.

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