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North Jersey school sports departments weigh big cuts

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The Record

STAFF WRITER

Bogota High School is losing its wrestling, soccer and bowling squads.

In Wallington, the freshman boys basketball team, the junior high sports program and the athletic trainer could go.

And athletes in Wayne, Tenafly and elsewhere may have to pay an activity fee to compete.

Drastic cuts to staffs, schedules, equipment purchases and transportation could be a reality for nearly every high school athletic department in North Jersey as districts grapple with an unprecedented budget crisis caused by a dramatic drop in state aid.

Governor Christie's proposed \$29.3 billion budget would cut \$102 million in aid to Bergen County districts, \$64 million to Passaic County districts and \$820 million statewide.

"It's a scary time. A very, very scary time," Nick Sauter, the Passaic Valley assistant principal for athletics, said last week. "Some of my colleagues are going to lose their jobs."

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"School is just not going to be the same. We're hoping for the best for now."

Many districts are still trying to determine how the massive funding shortfalls will affect their athletic programs as they prepare their 2010-11 budgets. School districts face a deadline of next Monday to place budgets on the ballot for public approval in the April 20 elections.

"We're facing challenges we've never faced before, and I know there are going to have to be some tough decisions made for everybody," said Steve Timko, executive director of the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association.

Most athletic departments are being hit with tens of thousands of dollars in cuts to budgets that generally range from \$300,000 to \$800,000. River Dell has to slice 10 percent from its \$750,000 budget, according to athletic director Denis Nelson. Ridgewood, which eliminated 12 assistant coaches last year to make up for \$100,000 in losses, has to make further reductions this year.

Athletes at Wayne Hills and Wayne Valley high schools will now have to pay \$100 to

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participate in sports and hockey parents will have to share the cost of ice time to help cover a \$6.6 million drop in state aid, according to the district's proposed budget. Tenafly also is seriously exploring an activity fee to plug an approximately \$100,000 hole in its athletic budget, said athletic director Ed Craumer.

These are some of the choices many North Jersey administrators are considering:

- * Eliminating entire athletic departments.
- * Cutting teams based on cost per athlete, participation numbers or even the most recent sport offered by the school.
- * Eliminating subvarsity programs for middle school and freshman students as well as junior varsity teams.
- * Reducing schedules, especially independent games.
- * Charging a pay-to-play, or activity, fee.
- * Scaling back on transportation. Ridgewood is encouraging its coaches to obtain commercial driver's licenses so they can drive school buses. The athletic director, Greg McDonald, estimates that he spends \$3,000 in busing just for the baseball team.

Northern Valley-Demarest athletic director Greg Butler said his school may consolidate times of games so freshman, JV and varsity teams can share buses and referee costs.

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The depth of the cuts may not be fully realized until the public votes on the proposed school budgets. Rejected budgets will almost certainly lead to the elimination of even more programs and jobs, officials say.

Some ramifications may not be felt for years. Officials fear the loss of subvarsity programs could impact entire communities, stranding teens in an anemic economy that offers few jobs, and now, even fewer extracurricular activities. Many of the athletes affected need the programs the most — at-risk teens who use sports as a motivator to succeed in school and non-superstars who play for fun, officials said.

"What are some of these kids going to do without these programs?" said James Manco, Butler's athletic director. "What are these kids going to do? I keep saying it. It's about the kids. Your No. 1 priority is what's good for kids. It's going to affect them.

"You try to get kids to be involved in stuff, and now you're cutting programs?"

Entire sports threatened

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Beth Ferrara, mother of Wallington bowler Christopher Ferrara, is concerned not only about high-schoolers but also athletes in the lower grades.

"It's upsetting," she said. "I feel sorry for the younger kids that are coming up."

Sports such as bowling, hockey, skiing and swimming have been especially threatened, officials said.

Fees for games and practices at off-campus facilities — pools, rinks, bowling lanes — bloat budgets. Ridgewood pays \$33,000 for time at the Ice House in Hackensack, according to McDonald. West Milford pays \$380 an hour at the Ice Vault in Wayne, an expense picked up by its hockey parents through fund-raisers and contributions.

In Ramsey, the parent-sponsored hockey association already collects \$1,000 per athlete per year to pay for ice time, uniforms and referees, according to coach Bob Toy.

For swim teams, pool fees can range from \$6,500 to \$12,750 per season, officials said.

Transportation costs also balloon expenses with daily travel to and from facilities. McDonald estimates each bus trip costs about \$300. As a result, many schools are attempting to whittle down their schedules in every sport. Some are even contemplating

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league-only schedules.

But for some districts, it's still not enough to make ends meet. Some have cut middle school and freshman programs and more could be on the chopping block.

Ramsey will lose its middle school sports program, said Superintendent Roy Montesano. Wallington will lose its junior high program and freshman boys basketball, said athletic director Jim Brannick. And he fears if the budget is rejected by voters next month, coaches and more programs could be cut.

"As soon as you start cutting the freshman programs, in a short amount of time you're going to decimate the entire program," said Ridgewood's McDonald. "At the freshman program, that's where the major amount of teaching goes on."

Bogota, which has wrestled with budget issues in the past, is losing its middle school program and its varsity bowling and freshman boys basketball teams, athletic director Brad DiRupo said. It lost its wrestling and soccer programs when its co-op with Weehawken was dissolved.

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Some public school officials also worry that deep cuts will drive athletes to parochial schools. Not only do Bergen Catholic, Don Bosco and Immaculate Heart Academy offer elite varsity teams, they also offer subvarsity sports.

"It's definitely a threat," Manco said. "That's been talked about."

What about safety?

Safety will be sacrificed if districts eliminate their athletic trainers or reduce them to part-time status, athletic directors warn. Trainers patrol the sidelines during games and practices, not only treating injured athletes but working to prevent injuries and guiding athletes through rehabilitation.

Statewide, at least six trainers have been told their jobs are being eliminated and 12 others have been informed their positions could be cut or their hours reduced, according to Robb Rehberg, past president of the Athletic Trainers Society of New Jersey. The athletic trainer in Wallington is one of those casualties, according to Brannick.

Tim Gillen, West Milford's athletic director, called trainers the most valuable people in sports departments.

"Trainers drive the boat when it comes to

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[concussion awareness]," he said. "I think if you have an athletic program, you have to have an athletic trainer."

Rehberg agreed.

"By eliminating athletic trainers in schools, they're putting athletes at risk because there won't be a health care provider there," Rehberg said. "The economy is affecting everybody. No one is immune. But at the same time, you're taking the only health care provider out of there and you're left with nothing."

Officials throughout the region worry that this round of cuts could be just the beginning.

"I'm very, very concerned about next year," McDonald said. "And it's not going to get better."

Staff Writers Ronald P. Clark, Darren W. Cooper, Mark J. Czerwinski, Mike Esposito, Keith Idec, Greg Mattura, Ed Mills, Gregory Schutta, Kristina Scoppa and Andy Vasquez contributed to this article.

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