

High schools reach teens via sports business

BY ERIK SWANSON

CORRESPONDENT

Sports marketing and sports management classes aren't limited to college campuses these days. High schools are working elements of sports business into their curricula, as well, with one school opening in New York this fall going so far as to be a sports business specialty school.

According to the professionals involved with these programs, the goal of the offerings is typically less about career paths than it is about finding a way to connect with teenagers in an era of blogs, Facebook and Twitter.

"I think the hope is that most of what they're learning in [a] class will translate to other industries and to other areas," said Chris Lindauer, president of Portland-based Sports Career Consulting. "It's not necessarily a situation where students walk out of this high school class thinking they're ready to step up as the next executive at Nike or at the NBA."

Lindauer's company has provided digital textbooks to nearly 1,500 high school business and marketing teachers across the country. He says sports and entertainment marketing courses, as they're typically labeled, are a good way for teachers and administrators to connect with what he describes as a generation of high schoolers that is "pretty elusive and tough to reach."

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JON GREENWALT

ASSOCIATE IN BUSINESS AND
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"They're just using a different frame of reference to support the lessons, because they're integrating sports and entertainment examples to illustrate all the different concepts in the class," Lindauer said.

Sports-related offerings have in fact been available in high schools for at least 20 years. Fairfax County (Va.) Public Schools introduced what is believed to have been the first high school-level sports and entertainment marketing course in the country in 1989. Six years later, it unveiled an advanced sports and entertainment marketing course. Today, 24 of the 25 high schools in the district offer the system's introductory level sports and entertainment marketing course.

Amy Granahan, marketing coordinator for the school system, said more students in the system take sports and entertainment classes than any other marketing elective. Across the state of Virginia, she said, enrollment in courses of this

type has almost doubled in the last five years.

"The premise was to trick students into learning marketing in the sports environment," Granahan said. "If you take a look at our Level 1 curriculum, it's the general marketing concepts, but what we're trying to do is bring the sports experiences into the classroom."

Another early adopter was the New York State Education Department, which first introduced a sports and entertainment marketing course about 15 years ago. In the last five years, the state has added sports management and entertainment law courses to the curriculum.

Jon Greenwalt, associate in business and marketing education for the department, said the sports courses exist in part as a recruiting tool.

"If you put the word 'sports' in front of anything, you're going to have kids in the classroom," Greenwalt said. "I figured once I got the [kids] in the door for one class, I could get them excited about business and have them take multiple classes."

Greenwalt thinks sports and entertainment marketing is a growth area for high schools, especially as teachers have become more comfortable with the material. The key, however, is to focus on teaching marketing first.

"They have to teach the principles of marketing. Otherwise, it is a fantasy football league," Greenwalt said. "If it's done properly, and you're actually teaching marketing or management and using the sports industry to teach principles, then I think it has a tremendous future."

To that end, New York City's Business of Sports School is set to open in September with an inaugural class of 120 ninth-graders.

School Principal Josh Solomon said the idea for the school originated from Mayor Michael Bloomberg's 2008 Mayoral Task Force on Career and Technical Education Innovation, which made career and technical schools a citywide priority.

"There are so many opportunities for careers, and all of the schools that have similar focus, even at the high school level, are oversubscribed," Solomon said. "Our philosophy is if students are choosing a school where they're interested in going, they will be much more engaged and interested in school and in succeeding."

The Business of Sports School is subject to the same academic standards as other public high schools across the state, meaning each class will integrate business skills and professional interaction into a more traditional curriculum. "For example, we don't teach a straight English class; we teach a business communications class," Solomon said.

The school is 95 percent publicly funded, with a \$400,000 start-up grant also coming from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Solomon said. Ten teachers selected from within the state department of educa-

tion system will be on staff at the school's opening, with Solomon saying the sports focus attracted many qualified candidates, some who previously have worked in fields "relating to sports media or advertising or team operations."

Students who graduate will take with them both an academic diploma and a business endorsement from the state of New York, certifying that the student has fulfilled a business curriculum.

"We're really trying to give our high school graduates every advantage when they apply for college and business jobs and internships," Solomon said. "This will give them a leg up, certainly within [the] state."

Whether the Business of Sports School will prompt similar openings remains to be seen.

"A lot of people are kind of sitting back to see how well those are received: Are they able to meet the education standards?" said Lindauer, who consulted Solomon as he developed the proposal for the school. "It's kind of the same thing as charter schools. There is some opportunity and some growth there, but there's still a hesitancy for people to really truly embrace it until they can really show that they're able to accomplish the same education objectives as everybody else."

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PRINCIPAL,
BUSINESS OF SPORTS SCHOOL

Greenwalt agreed, saying the difficulty for the Business of Sports School will be effectively teaching a traditional curriculum through a sports business lens.

Still, Lindauer isn't writing off sports-focused schools. While he believes elective-based sports and entertainment marketing courses will experience the greatest growth, he expects all sports programs to flourish by virtue of their ability to capture students' attention.

"When you have a class or a forum like this sports and entertainment stuff, teachers have more ability to harness that enthusiasm and bring out that creativity using a class like that than they do in a more traditional setting," Lindauer said. "I think if you can get the kids to buy in, that's the most important part."

Erik Swanson is a staff writer for sister publication SportsBusiness Daily.



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