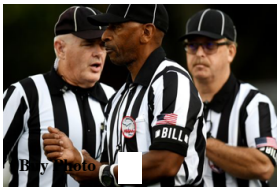


Why referee shortage may have long-term consequences for high school, youth sports

Eric Lacy, Lansing State Journal

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(Photo11: Nick King/Lansing State Journal)

LANSING - For nine straight academic years, the Michigan High School Athletic Association has seen the number of registered officials for sporting events drop.

There were 12,722 registered officials during the 2008-09 academic year compared to 9,816 last year, according to an MHSAA report.

This drop in officials hasn't created a severe problem — yet.

But Michigan's slide follows a national trend that could, if not reversed, eventually lead to mass reschedulings and game cancellations, said Mark Uyl, the MHSAA's executive director.

"I don't think we're in crisis mode," Uyl, 44, said. "But we want to try and address the problem before it becomes a crisis."

There have been no reports this fall sports season of game reschedulings or cancellations in the Lansing region due to a lack of officials.

But the Jackson area had, over a two-week span, [three varsity football games rescheduled](https://www.mlive.com/sports/jackson/index.ssf/2018/09/two_jackson_area_football_game.html) (https://www.mlive.com/sports/jackson/index.ssf/2018/09/two_jackson_area_football_game.html) because there weren't enough of them on Friday nights, according to the Jackson Citizen Patriot.

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Uyl said the news out of Jackson poses serious concerns for the well-being of high school sports. He's been a registered baseball official for more than 20 years and umpired the College World Series — twice.

Uyl said there are plenty of reasons why officials leave the industry or, at least, decide to lighten their workload:

- The strong economy means fewer officials need the extra income. Officials can make \$60 to \$70 for a varsity game, depending on the sport.
- Changes in jobs and family statuses alter schedules.
- Plenty of veteran officials are aging out, and fewer millennials are interested in refereeing.
- Unruly spectator/coach behavior drives officials away from the industry.

Uyl was named the MHSAA's [executive director in May](https://story/sports/high-school/2018/05/08/mhsaa-mark-uyl-next-executive-director/590641002/) ([/story/sports/high-school/2018/05/08/mhsaa-mark-uyl-next-executive-director/590641002/](https://story/sports/high-school/2018/05/08/mhsaa-mark-uyl-next-executive-director/590641002/)) and has an optimistic view about an officials shortage that's sweeping the country.



Former Michigan State players, including from left, Deb Traxinger, Kristin Haynie, Cetera Washington and Becca Mills were honored in 2016 at Breslin Center. Traxinger has been a basketball official for over 20 years and would like to see other former players work games. (Photo11: Al Goldis / For the Lansing State Journal)

Minter may not see a wave of reinforcements come by the time he retires.

It may take several years before the MHSAA gets back to 2008 levels.

There is, however, promising news for those in the industry concerned about the future.

Eaton Rapids High School is one of about 50 MHSAA member schools that dedicates time to training students who are intrigued by the job.

Students can actually get paid to do their homework.

Eaton Rapids teacher Eric Frohriep, 46,, of Charlotte, has been a registered official for 17 straight years after a three-year stint coaching middle school basketball and high school baseball.

He's found luck with his officiating class, now in its second year.

This fall, Frohriep has 26 students who will learn how to officiate football, basketball and volleyball games.

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Frohriep said Sept. 28 that seven of his students have already officiated at least one sporting event. Each student has earned at least \$70.

Ambitious students can rake in up to \$1,000 over the class' 12 weeks if they fill officiating jobs at the middle school, elementary and lower youth sports levels that often go unfilled by adults, Frohriep said.

"If you're teenager and you can make just a little bit of money flipping burgers, or you can make a lot of money doing a game, it's simple economics," Frohriep said. "They are going to choose to do this."

Each student in Frohriep's class is required to work a game — paid or unpaid.

Later in this school year, in the second and third trimesters, Frohriep will teach officiating classes that focus on basketball, baseball, slow pitch softball, volleyball and soccer.

Eaton Rapids freshmen Nathan Dick and Kyle Wise, both 14, have found their niche. They've spent most of their Saturdays officiating third- through sixth-grade football games.

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Eric Frohriep, teacher at Eaton Rapids High School, instructs an officiating class of 26 students this fall. He's been a registered official for several years and hopes his students will help ease the shortage of referees in the state. (Photo11: Robert Killips / Lansing State Journal,)

As of Sept. 28, Dick had already earned more than \$500 officiating youth football games. At that time, Wise had pocketed nearly \$400.

Wise said he keeps his schedule open because he enjoys being on the field. The only issues, he said, are the occasional angry coach or parent.

"It's a good way for kids to make money because, you know, every kid needs money," said Wise, who has paid \$70 for his own football official uniform. "It's great, and it's not hard homework either.

"You've always got someone out there helping you."

Eaton Rapids' officiating class, like others across the state, is affiliated with the [MHSAA's Legacy Program](https://www.mhsaa.com/Officials/Legacy-Student-Official-Program). (<https://www.mhsaa.com/Officials/Legacy-Student-Official-Program>).

The program allows any high school junior or senior enrolled in a member school to officiate junior varsity, freshmen, eighth or seventh grade games.

Younger students, like Dick and Wise, can work games at the sixth grade and elementary school levels because the events aren't sanctioned by the MHSAA.

During most years, there are about 150 students ages 16 or older who are eligible to work games at MHSAA member schools, Uyl said..

Pay is usually determined by the member school, conference, league or association that runs the sporting events.

Officials in Michigan typically make \$60 to \$70 for a varsity football or basketball game and up to \$65 for a hockey game.

A junior varsity/varsity volleyball doubleheader often pays \$75; baseball and softball doubleheaders can range from \$80 to \$110, Frohriep said.

Frohriep said officials who work state tournament wrestling matches can earn anywhere from \$50 to nearly \$200 per day. Compensation varies, Frohriep said, depending on if it is work for individual or team competition.

After just a few weeks of Frohriep's class in Eaton Rapids, sophomore Joslyn Monahan, 15, has found herself drawn to officiating.

She's a five-sport athlete who recently worked her first middle school volleyball game.

Monahan didn't get paid, but enjoyed the experience enough with a seasoned official that she's willing to give paid work a try.

"I'm very athletic and I want to stay entertained," Monahan said. "I see little kids and how they grow up to be better at their sport. It's a lot of fun to watch."

For some officials, the work can get downright depressing, according to the National Association of Sports Officials' 2017 survey.

Nearly half of the more than 17,000 officials who took it said they've felt in danger on the sidelines.

Two findings that stood out:

- Nearly 48% of male officials said they have felt unsafe or feared for their safety because of administrator, coach, player, or spectator behavior.
 - Nearly 45% of female officials said they have felt unsafe or feared for their safety because of administrator, coach, player, or spectator behavior.

Deb Traxinger, 58, of Haslett, knows what it feels like to be involved in heated competition that can often bring out the worst in people.

She was a girls basketball coach in Grand Ledge and East Lansing for about 20 years before she picked up a whistle in 2000.

Despite plenty of drama at games, Traxinger said she will officiate until she can no longer handle it physically.

Traxinger said she's usually impressed with how athletes handle themselves, but is often disgusted with what she's seen others do.

Her ideas to help curb hostility, improve the gameday atmosphere and reinvigorate the officiating industry:

- Have Q&A sessions with officials at parent meetings.
- Offer clinics for parents and coaches so they can learn what officials do.
- Recruit more former high school and college athletes to officiating.
- Develop a feeder system with colleges like Michigan State University.

"Whenever you have a human face on someone, you're much less likely to yell at them," Traxinger said. "We're not just striped shirts, and that's often the only thing people see."

The MHSAA wasn't created to police.

But it can educate, Uyl said, and will continue to push a public service campaign that emphasizes sportsmanship.

For several years, there have been announcements aired on the radio and read by public address announcers during sports events.

One sign, found on the MHSAA's website in printable format, addresses the state's officiating shortage head on.

It reads: "Endangered species. Save them. Show respect now!"

Every effort helps, Uyl said. He can't stress enough the importance of keeping officials in the game, especially those who may be thinking about an exit.

"With officiating, it's about the only walk of life where someone can plunk down \$5 and scream at another adult," Uyl said. "Just treat those officials like human beings."

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Haslett's Chance Cook celebrated Sept. 14 after recording a sack during the third quarter of the team's game against Fowlerville. An official looked on and is expected to be one of at least 9,000 registered with the Michigan High School Athletic Association. (Photo11: Nick King / Lansing State Journal)

How to get involved

For information on how to become an official, visit [mhsaa.com/officials](https://www.mhsaa.com/officials) (<https://www.mhsaa.com/officials>).

Nationwide concerns

The National Association of Sports Officials conducted in 2017 a survey it anticipated would draw 500 respondents. Barry Mano, the organization's president said he was shocked when it drew 17,487 respondents. The average age of respondents was 53.29. There were 1,124 respondents who identified as female and a total of 12,234 respondents — male and female — who identified as white.

- 48% of male officials said they have felt unsafe or feared for their safety because of administrator, coach, player, or spectator behavior.
- 45% of female officials said they have felt unsafe or feared for their safety because of administrator, coach, player, or spectator behavior.
- 11% of male officials said they have felt uncomfortable or threatened by other members of the officiating community.
- 21% of female officials said they have felt uncomfortable or threatened by other members of the officiating community.
- 36% of all respondents said youth competitive sports events display the worst sportsmanship. The mark was higher than any other level of competition.
- 40% of all respondents said parents cause the most problems with sportsmanship. The mark was higher than coaches, fans and players.
- 57% of all respondents said sportsmanship is getting worse.
- 19% of all respondents said they got into officiating because they were asked to by another official.
- 1% of all respondents said they got into officiating because they responded to a job posting.

Michigan's downward trend

The Michigan High School Athletic Association has seen the number of registered officials drop for nine straight academic years. During that time, the average age of officials has jumped from 44.87 to 48.57. Before the decrease started, the organization recorded about 12,500 registered officials in 2008, an all-time high. Below is a look at results from the organization's recent report emailed to the State Journal.

	2008-09	2017-18
Registered officials	12,722	9,816
Male officials	11,191	8,603
Female officials	1,524	1,213
African-American officials	1,060	931

Native American officials	73	59
Asian	59	61
Caucasian	11,270	8,406
Hispanic	199	177
Other	61	182

Officiating income

Those who work high school sporting events in Michigan typically an average of about \$60 to \$70 per varsity game, depending on the sport. Below are compensation statistics based on responses from over 17,000 officials to a 2017 survey conducted by the National Association of Sports Officials.

- 63% said they are underpaid, but accept budget constraints at the level they work.
- 61% said officials should not be paid based on quantity of experience.
- 57% said officials should be paid based on performance level.
- 35% said opportunity to increase their income played a role in decision to officiate.
- 31% said annual officiating income totaled up to \$2,500 in the last year.
- 28.5% said annual officiating income totaled up to \$5,000 in the last year.

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