

## Football

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posed rule does not specifically consider how many FRL students play football.

For example, West Liberty reported 271 freshmen-through-junior high school students in the latest Basic Educational Data Survey (BEDS) report to the Iowa Department of Education. Of those, 60.8 percent — 165 students — receive free or reduced-price lunches. Under the proposed rule, their enrollment would reduce those 165 students to 66, or an adjusted total of 205 in the eyes of the IHSAA.

West Liberty is a Class 2A school; using this year's cutoff numbers, it would drop down to Class 1A, putting them in the same class as West Branch. Class 1A schools this year run from 169 to 215 students.

Bears Head Football Coach Butch Pedersen said he commends the IHSAA for trying to make games more equitable, but "let's keep looking" for better ways.

"I don't feel good about this right now," he said. "But it's going to be fun to watch this play out."

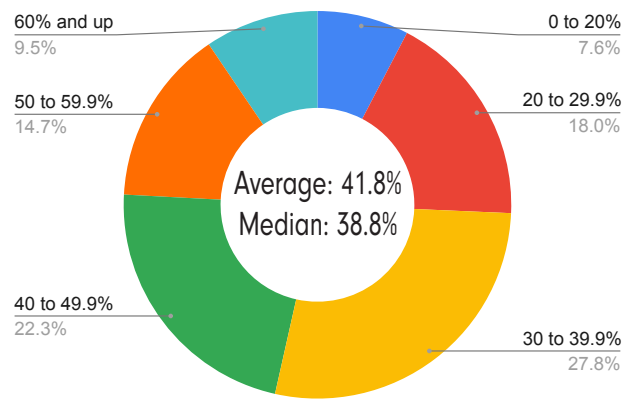
IHSAA Executive Director Tom Keating said member schools — he would not say which — asked the boys' sports governing body to "address disparity" in football scores.

Football is the only sport in which the IHSAA sets the regular-season schedule — all other sports schedules are worked out by the schools and their conferences — which is why the question went up to the IHSAA.

The IHSAA gave the question to its Classification Committee, Keating said, which spent

## Free, reduced-price lunch usage

Here is a breakdown of Iowa schools by participation in the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. West Branch Community School District reports that 24.3 percent of pupils participate in the program.



Source: Iowa Department of Education & Iowa Association of School Boards  
Chart by Gregory R. Norfleet

three years looking at other states and their efforts to help weaker teams win a few more games or at least play competitively.

The socioeconomic method mirrors that of the Minnesota State High School League. The IHSAA Board of Control, acting on the committee's recommendation, approved this method at its Dec. 5 meeting. It now goes to IHSAA member schools — which includes almost all public and private schools that participate in competitive sports, like West Branch — for a vote that runs from Dec. 16-22.

West Branch Community Schools Superintendent Marty Jimmerson would cast the vote for this school district, according to Activities Director Jake Stenberg.

If IHSAA member schools adopt the change, the decision would go to the Iowa State Board of Education for final approval. If approved there, the IHSAA would implement the rule starting with the 2023-24 school year.

Should the experiment prove successful, the IHSAA "will continue to study other sports to determine if this model should be applied," read a press release.

Keating said the sports-oversight organization will "do data-digging" to measure the results. They will look at average differences in scores, and review low-end teams' records.

"We'll get our data machine in motion," he said. "We're going to need to come back to report the results of this machine."

## Private schools

Pedersen said that he would like to understand better how this affects private schools, like longtime football rival and powerhouse Regina. The IDOE does not require private schools to report FRL numbers.

"If not all schools are required to turn in those numbers, I would not be in favor of this," Pedersen said.

Keating said the IHSAA would work with

the IDOE to get FRL figures from private and other non-public schools.

Keating noted he once served as principal for Xavier High School and there learned that some states will assign a FRL participation rate — sometimes between zero and 5 percent — when an actual figure was unknown.

He said he would prefer more accurate figures from those schools to help the proposed rule to, if approved, work.

The Classification Committee rejected two other models, he said. One was a "Success" model, or "championship" model, which assigned points to high-performing teams that reached far into the post-season. Once those teams reached a threshold, they bumped up to a higher class.

Keating said this model did not seem to take into account teams that showed temporary strength, like back-to-back strong seasons that ended when a certain batch of students graduated.

"We were a little nervous about that," he said.

Another model factored in a "multiplier" to non-public or "non-boundary" schools that could also put smaller schools in higher classifications.

Pedersen said this "multiplier" model sounds promising because private schools like Regina are allowed to recruit.

"If I did that, I'd get in trouble because that's illegal," Pedersen said.

The Bears coach said some of his players showed him letters inviting them to attend Catholic high schools because they attend Catholic churches. The letters are worded to focus on academics, but he suspects they want them to play sports, too.

Regina Junior/Senior High Activities Director Taylor Hotek said the proposed rule prompted "lots of thoughts."

"I think looking at statewide statistics, as far as football goes, this is probably a step in the right direction to ensure equity among student-athletes across the state," he said.

He said the rule could help ensure student-athletes "are succeeding or finding success in the sport they love to play."

Hotek said Regina representatives would talk to the IHSAA about its FRL figures rather than submit them to the IDOE where they would be available to the public.

Keating said Minnesota came up with the 40-percent formula when it learned that about 60 percent of FRL students participated in sports or extra-curricular activities.

And, he noted, that Minnesota revisited that figure but kept it in place.

## Schools, FRL and records

Here is a list of River Valley Conference and District 5 football opponents by the percentage of participation in free and reduced-price lunches (FRL), their 2022 football season record, and current football classification. Class A (smaller) through 3A (larger) are represented.

	FRL %	2022 football record	Class
West Branch	24.3	11-1	1A
Mediapolis	26.8	8-2	1A
Wilton	31.1	4-4	1A
Durant	28.9	5-4	1A
Regina	n/a	5-4	1A
Louisa-Muscatine	34.2	0-8	1A
Anamosa	41.4	1-7	2A
Beckman Catholic	n/a	4-4	1A
Bellevue	26.5	4-5	A
Camanche	38.1	4-5	2A
Cascade	28.2	5-4	1A
Maquoketa	55.3	1-8	3A
Mid-Prairie	25.7	6-4	2A
Monticello	31.4	7-3	2A
Northeast-Goose Lake	33.4	4-5	2A
Tipton	25.7	0-8	2A
West Liberty	60.8	3-6	2A

Source: Iowa Department of Education  
Chart by Gregory R. Norfleet

"To be honest, like with the multiplier or the success factor (models), at some point you're putting in an arbitrary number. This is more of a ballpark (figure)."

Picking a lower number, like 10 percent, "would not change anybody."

"It's a balancing act," Keating said.

Pedersen said 60-percent participation seems high for any demographic, not low.

## Low expectations?

Keating said the IHSAA considered that some might interpret this proposed rule to suggest that students from low-income families cannot compete at the same level as other students.

"We had some concerns about that perception," he said. "We're trying to give the school community (and students) a place where they can have enough of a positive experience. We're not trying to make everybody have a 5-4 or 4-5 record, but if we can get some schools that have been 0-9 a couple of wins with a competitive schedule — or a game that is 42-28 instead of 76-0 — that's what we want to do."

The IHSAA director noted that the rule applies to all schools, not just low-performers.

Hotek said that looking across the state and seeing teams with poor win-loss records and high FRL participation suggests this proposed rule is worth trying.

"I would not generalize and say that poor students cannot compete with those

who come from a more affluent background," he said. "The IHSAA is taking steps to rectify that and to look at that inequity there."

Like Pedersen, Hotek said he wants to see what happens should the rule pass.

"I'm interested to see where this goes statewide," the activities director said.

West Sioux's Falcons this season put forth an 11-2 record and finished in the Class 1A state championship, where they lost to Van Meter.

The Falcons have posted winning seasons each year since 2014 and won the state championship in 2018.

West Sioux enrolls 199 students with 59.3 percent participating in FRL. Using current figures, the proposed IHSAA rule would drop that figure to 152, likely sending them down to compete against smaller, Class A teams.

Keating said the IHSAA could return scheduling authority to member schools and allow them to find opponents, but most are not interested in that option.

"West Branch might have trouble finding games because schools don't want to play them," he said.

The IHSAA director said it is difficult for the organization to measure team strengths and FRL numbers are one of the only measures available to consider.

"We listened to our member schools," he said. "If the membership supports this, we'll move forward."

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