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**Queens of the Hill: How Title IX Fares in the Hilltop Neighborhood
of Columbus, Ohio**

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Claremont McKenna College

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for
Senior Thesis
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Abstract

National research indicates that Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 leaves Black girls behind in the pursuit of gender equity. Low rates of participation and high dropout rates in girls sports plague low-income, majority-minority high schools. This thesis investigates whether the national research holds true in Columbus, Ohio, specifically at West High School. Following from a series of interviews with coaches, teachers, and a student, I find that West High School's athletic program is Title IX compliant, but girls at West High School still face severe barriers to sports participation. A school can comply with Title IX and fall short of equal opportunity for sports participation. Title IX leaves girls at West High School behind because it is reliant on a top-down approach of administrative punishment, threatening the loss of federal funding. To achieve authentic gender equity, West High School and other low-income, majority-minority schools must supplement Title IX with a bottom-up approach that is community and culturally centered.

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Introduction

Sports have the power to improve physical health and also to improve psychological and emotional health, improve life outcomes, and promote gender equity. As this thesis will show, female participation in sports is correlated with improved academic performance, higher levels of confidence, and better mental health. All girls and women are entitled to the right to play sports, and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is supposed to safeguard this entitlement. Title IX catalyzed monumental progress for gender equity in sports, but it overlooked girls and women at the margins of society.

Title IX leaves Black girls behind. The national data corroborates this. Black girls face lower rates of participation and higher rates of dropout in high school sports. I was born and raised in Columbus, Ohio, and I wanted to investigate if these national trends hold true in Columbus City Schools, a majority-minority and urban school district. I focused on West High School, a high school on the West Side of Columbus. West High School is in the Hilltop neighborhood, which is regularly associated with poverty and violence in the news. Based on my research, West High School's athletic program is Title IX compliant. The administration treats boys and girls sports equally and makes explicit efforts to do so. For instance, girls and boys sports must play an equal number of games on "prime" night, or Friday nights. West High School strives for gender equity in athletics.

While West High School is Title IX compliant, Title IX compliance does not guarantee gender equity in sports. While West High School experiences high retention rates among its female athletes, low rates of participation of girls in sports afflict the school. Title IX threatens to withhold federal funding to educational institutions that discriminate in educational and athletic programs on the basis of sex. But as my research suggest, administrative compliance is a

nonissue at West High School. Instead, gender inequity in sports is rooted in aloofness, disinterest, and financial barriers in the community. Title IX leaves girls at West High School behind because it relies on a top-down approach of administrative punishment, threatening the loss of federal funding. For Title IX to achieve authentic gender equity in low-income, majority-minority schools, Title IX must be supplemented with a bottom-up approach that is community and culturally focused.

At West High School, the solution includes improved access to youth sports, transportation after sports practices and games, and nutritional support. The solution also must remove financial barriers to sports participation, and I propose City of Columbus considers a graduated stipend program for high school sports play. Finally, the solution must improve educational and language support for West High School's Somali families, in which culturally specific gender norms discourage sports play for Somali girls.

This thesis begins with a chapter of background information, including information on Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the hardship of Black Women in the United States, and the socioeconomic character of Columbus, the Hilltop neighborhood, and West High School. Chapter 2 highlights the national data on Title IX's impact on girls of color, the state of sports participation for Black children in Columbus, and the quality of life for Black girls in Columbus. Chapter 3 discusses my findings on gender equity within West High School, and Chapter 4 outlines grassroots solutions to close the gender gap in sports participation on Columbus's West Side.

Title IX, Sports, and Columbus: Contextualizing Gender Inequity

A. Introduction and History of Title IX

In 1868, Congress passed the 14th Amendment, guaranteeing “equal protection of the laws” for all United States citizens.¹ Nevertheless, sex discrimination persisted in education, employment, and political citizenship. In 1972, President Nixon signed legislation adding Title IX to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This law reinterpreted the 14th amendment to advance equal protection from sex discrimination. Only 37 words long, Title IX states that “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”² It outlaws federally funded educational institutions from discriminating in educational and athletic programs on the basis of sex. It also permits the federal agency that provides funding to regulate or terminate financial assistance when an institution does not comply.

In 1984, the Supreme Court decided *Grove City College v. Bell*. The Court’s decision did not require institutions to fully adhere to Title IX to receive federal financial funding. Instead, schools only had to comply in the programs or offices that received funding. For Grove City College, only the student financial aid office had to comply with Title IX because it was the only office with federal funding. The New York Times described the case as involving “a clash of values: the American tradition of valuing diversity and autonomy, especially in colleges, where academic freedom could be stifled by pervasive regulation, versus Washington’s commitment to bar the use of Federal funds to subsidize discrimination.”³ The Court’s decision made women’s sports programs vulnerable because these programs often did not receive financial support. Institutions suspended athletic programs that did not generate revenue, overwhelmingly affecting

women's sports teams. In 1988, Congress passed the Civil Rights Restoration Act in 1988. The law overturned Grove City College and outlaws sex-based discrimination throughout entire institutions if any program or office receives federal financial funding. President Ronald Reagan vetoed the legislation, saying that it “vastly and unjustifiably expand[s] the power of the [f]ederal government over the decisions and affairs of private organizations.”⁴ A two-thirds majority in the House and Senate overrode the veto, and the Civil Rights Restoration Act became federal law. America's checks and balances between separate branches of government perpetuated progress in gender equity.⁵

While Title IX creates glass ceiling-shattering opportunities in women's sports, sports were not the law's initial focus. Margaret Dunkle is a Title IX researcher, and in the 1970s, she helped the bill pass. According to Dunkle, “Sports wasn't really discussed or considered much at all when Congress was considering the Title IX bill or when it enacted the law.”⁶ Congress passed Title IX to outlaw sex-based discrimination generally and to protect citizens from such discrimination.⁷ For instance, advocates were initially concerned with quotas for female students and higher grade requirements for female applications.⁸ Nevertheless, Dunkle drafted a radical report in 1974 on the status of women's and men's sports at U.S. colleges and universities.⁹ Dunkle's research demonstrated what was wrong within athletics, exposing another realm of sex discrimination that the Department of Education must address. To Olivia B. Waxman for *Time*,

Differences in funding were clearly at the root of many of the problems. It was common for the men's teams to get budgets for travel on chartered buses, while the women's teams had to hold bake sales, sell candy bars or Christmas trees, and seek donations in order to fund their travel and uniforms. At one big state school, with a 50% female student body, only \$5,000 of the \$68,000 in student fees that was allocated for athletes

went to women's teams. In perhaps the most dramatic case of inequity that Dunkle found, one Midwestern university put more than \$2.6 million a year into men's athletics, while the women's teams got no money at all.¹⁰

Additionally, schools did not provide equal medical assistance. Waxman recalls, "One female athlete said she wasn't allowed to get her knee injury checked out with an ultrasonic machine that doctors used to treat male athletes."¹¹ While Title IX made progress for women's sports, increased visibility of female athletics does not signal equity. The Women's Sports Foundation reports that "By age 14, many girls are dropping out of sports at two times the rate of boys."¹² Though Title IX news headlines often involve college sports, Title IX also includes elementary and secondary education. Authentic gender equity at the collegiate level cannot exist without equity at the youth level.

B. Sports' positive impact on health, well-being, and life outcomes

Simply put, kids who play sports do better in life. Rochelle M. Eime and co-authors found, "There is substantive evidence of many different psychological and social health benefits of participation in sport by children and adolescents."¹³ Anyone wanting a kinder, smarter, healthier, happier, and more prosperous community should defend the right to play. It is an essential children's right, and it is also an effective mechanism to improve mental and physical health and achieve a higher standard of living. The right to play is a right to health for young people. The Aspen Institute's Project Play reports, "afterschool physical activity programs would reduce obesity the most, 1.8% among children ages 6 to 12. That's twice the projected impact as any ban on child-directed fast-food advertising."¹⁴ Sports improve life longevity and reduce the risk of diseases, such as heart disease and diabetes. The right to play is also a child's right to emotional and mental health. According to the Aspen Institute's Project Play,

Among students who exercised six to seven days a week, 25.1% felt sad for two weeks or more in the past 12 months, compared to 35.7% of students who reported exercising on zero to one day (Women's Sports Foundation, 2004). Of students who exercised six to seven days, 15% reported suicidal ideation, and 6.4% reported a suicide attempt in the past year, compared to 24.6% and 10.3% of students who exercised zero to one day, respectively (Journal of American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2015).¹⁵

Next, while the evidence is mixed, the right to play sports can foster moral values.¹⁶ Sports rely on teamwork and self-discipline. In turn, sports are a form of virtue development as young athletes cultivate self-esteem, ambition, organization, and leadership.¹⁷ Altogether, youth sports are a remarkable force for good.

The benefits of sports should be shared by young boys and girls. According to the Women's Sports Foundation, "high school girls who play sports are less likely to be involved in an unintended pregnancy, more likely to get better grades in school and more likely to graduate than girls who do not play sports."¹⁸ The Women's Sports Foundation also reports, "Girls and women who play sports have higher levels of confidence and self-esteem and lower levels of depression...[and] girls and women who play sports have a more positive body image and experience higher states of psychological well-being than girls and women who do not play sports."¹⁹ Thus, it is especially disturbing that girls drop out of sports at twice the rate of boys by age 14. Dr. Nandini Marthur Collins and co-authors corroborate the Women's Sports Foundation. In *The Sport Journal*, they conclude "a lifetime of sport participation beginning in youth and adolescence improved physical and psychological well-being of individuals as they enter young adulthood."²⁰ Girls who quit sports cannot enjoy the life-changing benefits of sports while their male counterparts acquire the multitude of physical, mental, academic, and

professional assets. Without Title IX, its thorough enforcement, and its continued improvement, youth sports can exacerbate opportunity gaps based on sex and ethnicity.

C. The compounded hardship of being Black and Women.

Black women have faced unique compounded injustices throughout American history, including in school sports. In her hallmark piece “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” Kimberle Crenshaw argues that Black women face compounded injustice, distinct from that confronting a black man or a white women.²¹ For instance, in *DeGraffenreid v General Motors*, according to Crenshaw, the Court argued, “the plaintiffs’ attempt to bring a suit not on behalf of Blacks or women, but specifically on behalf of Black women.”²² According to Crenshaw, the Court claimed that “this lawsuit must be examined to see if it states a cause of action for race discrimination, sex discrimination, or alternatively either, but not a combination of both.”²³ In *Moore v Hughes Helicopter, Inc.*, according to Crenshaw, “the court held that a Black woman could not use statistics reflecting the overall sex disparity in supervisory and upper-level labor jobs because she had not claimed discrimination as a woman, but ‘only’ as a Black woman.”²⁴ Finally, in *Payne v. Travenol*, the court concluded that there was general race discrimination at a pharmaceutical plant. Crenshaw writes, “the court refused to extend the remedy to Black men for fear that their conflicting interests would not be adequately addressed.”²⁵ The court denied that remedies for racism against Black women could include Black men, once again reflecting the danger of the narrow categories for discrimination in our legal system.²⁶ The scope of American law and consciousness must expand to safeguard those that are uniquely disadvantaged. Unfortunately, the timeline of Title IX since its passage in 1972 demonstrates an unfulfilled promise to girls of color.

White women and girls are the primary beneficiaries of Title IX. According to the Women's Sports Foundation, "Girls of color, girls of lower socioeconomic status, and girls in urban and rural areas often enter sports later, participate in lower numbers, and drop out earlier than White girls, suburban girls, and girls from higher socioeconomic status."²⁷ Additionally, the National Women's Law Center (NWLC) reports, "Because of the vast gaps in resources available in typical heavily minority high schools (less than 10% White enrollment), both girls and boys of color have access to far fewer athletic participation opportunities than students attending typical heavily White high schools (90% White enrollment) (National Women's Law Center, 2015b)."²⁸ Finally, NWLC also reports, "Comparing the gaps in opportunities available to female athletes, 49% of typical heavily minority high schools have large shortfalls in athletic opportunities compared to 16% of typical heavily White high schools."²⁹ Title IX fails to achieve authentic gender equality by leaving girls of color behind.

D. Columbus, Ohio

This thesis will focus on elementary and secondary education in Columbus, Ohio and discrimination against girls of color. First, I will provide demographic and political background on Columbus to contextualize my argument. According to Census data as of April 1, 2020, Columbus's population estimate is 905,748 with 357,128 households.³⁰ Columbus is the nation's 14th-most populous city in the country and the second-most populous city in the Midwest.³¹ Census data also shows Columbus to be 58.6% White, 28.0% Black or African American, and 6.2% Hispanic or Latino.³² This is compared to the national data that shows the United States to be 61.6% White, 12.4% Black or African American, and 18.7% Hispanic or Latino.³³ Notably, Columbus has the second largest Somali and Somali American population in the country.³⁴ Columbus has a diverse population and unique geography. It has mixed demographic and

economic data, and a mix of urban, suburban, and surrounding rural communities. Accordingly, Columbus has been dubbed the “the most normal place in America” and as one of America’s most representative cities.³⁵ In fact, Columbus is so representative that many corporations use it as a test market, and the city is filled with corporate chains. Politically, the City of Columbus typically votes Democrats into office, but the surrounding suburban and rural areas become redder as you drive farther away from the urban center.

E. The Hilltop Neighborhood and Columbus’s West Side

My Columbus case study will focus on West High School, a Columbus City Schools high school on the west side of Columbus. West High School is in the Hilltop neighborhood. In the early 20th century, the Hilltop emerged as “the neighborhood in which to live.”³⁶ The Hilltop name comes from its topographic advantage. After the flood of 1913, a common notion was “moving up to the Hilltop!”³⁷ Following the flood, the Hilltop’s population grew from 2000 in 1900 to 15,000 in 1920.³⁸ The Hilltop business and social scene grew, and when the Great Depression and World War II presented obstacles, mutual support through hard times led to improved local culture and social cohesion.

During the civil rights movement in the mid-1950s, the Hilltop diversified. Diversification led to some social unrest as new residents entered a community with established culture and norms. Highway construction additionally displaced residents. Nevertheless, newfound diversity was also the root of the Hilltop’s close-knit community. Wes Reed, West High School graduate of 1974 and father of former professional basketball player, Michael Redd, spent 45 years as a Hilltop resident. In his words, “In this neighborhood, you had a booming, white-collar neighborhood of families... so it was just a joy to live up here at that time”³⁹ Past Hilltop residents remember it as a family and community-oriented neighborhood. The Oakley

Full Gospel Baptist Church, now J. Ashburn Jr. Youth Center and part of the Boys and Girls Club of Central Ohio, was a vibrant community hot spot. Byron L Potts is part of a third-generation Hilltop family. Potts remembers, “It was a very close-knit family... I’m talking about family – not only blood relatives – but we all knew everyone. It was a very close-knit neighborhood.”⁴⁰ Potts also remembers Oakley and the youth center being fundamental social centers of the community. Additionally, Columbus’ West Side raised famous figures. Nancy Wilson is a three-time Grammy winner and graduated from West High School, and Jesse Owens, Olympian track star, lived on Columbus’s West Side when he won his four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics.⁴¹ High achievement and family-focused values were once pinnacles of the Hilltop Neighborhood.

Today’s news headlines about the Hilltop look different — usually associating the community with poverty and violence. Loss of businesses and low-income levels plague the community. Western Electric, General Motors, and Westland Mall all neglected the area.⁴² Businesses closed, and grocery stores and department stores left. Furthermore, economic issues often precede violence. According to the Kirwan Institute at The Ohio State University, “In some parts of this neighborhood, poverty rates have more than doubled, from 23% to 47% from 2000 and 2012, and homeownership has dropped more than 10% in the same period.”⁴³ WBNS, the CBS, Columbus-affiliate news station, compiled recent articles on the neighborhood. The headlines are consistent and staggering: “1 critical in Hilltop Area shooting,” “16-year old injured after shots fired into Hilltop neighborhood home,” “1 shot and killed in the Hilltop,” and “18-year-old in critical condition following shooting in Hilltop area.”⁴⁴ Crime and safety are universal concerns to residents, based on surveys and interviews with community members by the Kirwan Institute.⁴⁵ Additionally, surveyed residents noted the lack of educational resources in

the Hilltop, to no fault of the teachers and community-organizers working hard day-in and day-out. The Kirwan Institute reports, “Though there was an acknowledgement that educators and administrators were doing the best they could with what they had, there were few resources for them to draw on.”⁴⁶ The quality of school and extracurriculars depends on financial resources and the health and safety in the community. While the Hilltop was once known as a vibrant neighborhood, home to Grammy-winners and Olympic greats, it now makes headlines for being unsafe and impoverished.

To understand a community infiltrated by drug and gang-related violence and beset by inequitable resources, we have to reflect on its history. This is especially pertinent when considering that Hilltop residents, many who have long family histories in the neighborhood, take pride in their home. While residents speak of the prevalence of crime concerns, they also describe their neighbors as “friendly” and “helpful.”⁴⁷ Additionally, while the Hilltop’s diversity exacerbated socioeconomic challenges, it is also one of the neighborhood’s strengths. According to the Kirwan Institute, “Some [residents] shared that being a ‘Hilltopper’ trumped other ‘identities’ such as race and class.”⁴⁸ Finally, to Hilltop residents interviewed by the Kirwan Institute, “the history of the Hilltop itself was viewed as rich and something that should be communicated and shared.”⁴⁹ It is a disservice to its residents if Hilltop history is neglected in favor of stories of drugs and violence..

F. West High School’s current enrollment and demographic information

This thesis presents a case study on West High School in Columbus, Ohio. Total enrollment at West High School is 867 students. West High school is 45% female and 55% male. West High School is a majority-minority school, with 62% of students that identify with a minority demographic group. 37% of students identify as Black or African American, 23% of students

identify as Hispanic, 1% of students identify as Asian, and 0.8% of students identify as American Indian or Alaska Native. Approximately 19% of students are English Language Learners. Data on the Somali and Somali American population at West High School was unavailable. All data is courtesy of a source that teaches and coaches at the high school.

G. Somali American Culture

When the Somali Civil War broke out in the 1990s, an influx of Somalis resettled in the United States. As noted, Columbus has the second largest Somali and Somali American population in the country. Somali is the official language of Somalia. Additionally, the Somali community has strong ties to the Islamic faith. Somali women often wear full-length dresses, and they may also wear a malqabad, a thin silk head scarf.⁵⁰ The Somali culture also adheres to strict gender roles. According to the University of North Carolina Greensboro's Center for New North Carolinians, which researches immigration issues in the community,

Somali culture is publicly male-centered although women are included in making important decisions for the family. Somali women are not considered inferior; they simply fulfill different roles in Somali culture than men do. Males are traditionally viewed as the bread- winners, but female labor is valued for productive tasks as well as for household chores, as long as the male is still considered the primary financial contributor to the family purse. Responsibility for the pride and honor of Somali families rests mainly with the women of the family. If a girl is well-bred and maintains her dignity, Somalis feel she reflects well on her family. Conversely, if a girl behaves poorly, she will bring her family shame. A girl's behavior is, therefore, considered very important.⁵¹

Gendered responsibilities and expectations are entrenched in the Somali community. These fixed roles persist within Columbus's Somali community, as this thesis will demonstrate.

How Title IX Fails Girls of Color

A. Introduction

Title IX prevents the use of federal funds to support discriminatory practices on the basis of sex and protects individual citizens against those discriminatory practices. However, sex discrimination and racial discrimination are too often treated as separate issues. Title IX progress has left Black girls behind. Without explicit advocacy on behalf of Black girls and women, resource allocation between men's and women's sports programs do not account for the compounded discrimination and economic hardship experienced by Black and minority women. The timeline of Title IX since its passage in 1972 demonstrates an unfulfilled promise to Black girls. White women and girls have been the primary beneficiaries of Title IX, and the campaign for gender equity in youth sports has pushed Black girls to the sidelines.

B. Sports participation of Black and minority female athletes.

Title IX's protections are often only a dream for Black girls.⁵² While gender equity in sports participation for white girls has improved since the passage of Title IX, Black girls have been sidelined. For instance, Don Sabo and Phil Veliz note in their 2018 report,

The athletic participation rates of girls and boys in suburban schools were almost identical, and the gender differences in athletic participation in rural schools did not attain statistical significance. In contrast, almost twice as many daughters as sons in urban schools were not involved with any sports (55% and 26%, respectively), and similarly, sons outnumbered daughters as both moderately involved and highly involved athletes. In summary, gender equity in athletic participation has been achieved in many suburban communities, whereas disparities still exist in varying degrees in urban and rural communities.⁵³

Girls at the margins — including girls from minority, economically disadvantaged, and urban and rural communities — participate in youth sports at a lower rate and drop out earlier than white girls, suburban girls, and girls from wealthier backgrounds.⁵⁴ Sabo and Veliz also find that the drop-out rate for girls of color in urban centers is twice as high than that for suburban white girls.⁵⁵ Additionally By the age 14, 24% of girls in urban areas dropped out of sports, while 13% of girls from rural areas and 6% of girls from suburban areas dropped out by this age.⁵⁶ Gender differences in participation rates look even worse when data is broken down by racial and socioeconomic categories.

According to the National Women’s Law Center, “ [heavily minority schools] also allocate those fewer spots unequally such that girls of color get less than their fair share. Girls overall still receive fewer opportunities to play sports than boys, but girls in heavily minority schools are especially shortchanged.”⁵⁷ Schools can comply with Title IX by demonstrating that the percentage of spots on teams for female students is roughly equal to the percentage of female students. The National Women’s Law Center uses the term “female opportunity gap” to refer to the percentage point gap between the percentage of spots on teams allocated to girls and the percentage of students who are girls.⁵⁸ For example, if girls are 50% of the entire student body but only 40% percent of the spots on teams, then a school has a female opportunity gap of 10%. According to the National Women’s Law Center, female opportunity gaps greater than 10% are likely to indicate noncompliance with Title IX. Comparing the gaps in opportunities available to female athletes, 40% of heavily minority high schools have a large opportunity gaps (greater than 10%) compared with 16% of heavily White high schools.⁵⁹ In eight of the 13 states included in the National Women’s Law Center’s “Finishing Last: Girls of Color and School Sports Opportunities” report, the share of heavily minority schools with large female opportunity gaps

is more than double the share of heavily white schools with large gaps.⁶⁰ Minority girls participate in primary and secondary sports at disproportionately lower levels than white girls.

C. The cultural barriers to participation

The crossroads of race and gender also reveals the distinct cultural struggles of Black girls in sports. In their report “A qualitative investigation of sport activity participation and constraint negotiation among African American endurance runners,” J.A. Rice, M.E. Hambrick, and T.J. Aicher interviewed 12 African American female runners who participated in marathons and half-marathons. These runners navigated concerns about hair, physical appearance, body shape, and cultural expectations. These runners also shared the isolation they felt in participating in a traditionally “white” sport, feeling at times like “they were an attraction on display.”⁶¹ The compounded struggle and disadvantage of female students from minority communities is corroborated by data and first-hand accounts like this. This perspective is often lost in the catch-all push for gender equity under Title IX. Community and cultural expectations create unique experiences and aggravated barriers to participation for Black girls.

D. Financial inequality exacerbates the struggles of Black and minority female athletes.

Financial barriers to gender equity overlap with the struggles of Black and minority female athletes. Title IX marginalizes Black and minority female athletes. Its writers failed to take account of their distinct, compounded struggles. This marginalization is especially severe because minority girls are disproportionately from economically disadvantaged communities.⁶² The gap in sports participation rates between Black and white girls stems from the higher probability that Black girls attend schools with fewer resources and higher poverty rates.⁶³ Such schools tend to lack material resources, such as equipment, uniforms, and fields, human resources, such as coaches and trainers, programming, such as strength and conditioning, and

other opportunities to play and train.⁶⁴ According to Fatima Graves, Lara Kaufmann, and Lauren Frohlich's 2014 report, 33% of African American parents indicated that their daughters never participated in sports or had to stop playing because they could not financially support their participation.⁶⁵ In comparison, 18% of parents of white students reported this experience.⁶⁶ Racial inequality is exposed even more with "pay to play" fees that school districts across the country have implemented. Although illegal in some states, "pay to play" fees charge for school sports participation when the school faces financial hardship. Additionally, the overlap between income and race-based obstacles is evident in participation rates in club sports. Graves, Kaufmann, and Frohlich also found that 21% of white girls were involved in sports through a private organization compared with 7% of African American girls.⁶⁷ African American girls were more likely to participate in school sports programs.⁶⁸ When kids have to pay to play, Black girls are limited in club sports participation relative to white girls. This limits their opportunities to receive mentorship and play at a more committed, competitive level. Finally, according to Strandbu, Bakken, and Sletten in their 2019 report, "There is a minority-majority gap in sport participation due to cost, as minority groups often have fewer socioeconomic resources than majority groups."⁶⁹ Majority-minority schools typically have fewer resources and sports teams compared to majority white schools.

Race, community, culture, and income all affect accessibility and opportunities for sports participation. In the words of Kenneth D. Ferguson in the *Marquette Sports Law Review*, "The compounded nature of minority girls' experiences—when they specifically identify as African-American and Hispanic girls and they experience family income disparities—as the research corroborated, work together to increase the sports nonparticipation rates for minority girls. As a result, a single axis approach to addressing gender equity under Title IX marginalizes African-

American and Hispanic girls, who are disproportionately poor or live in urban communities.”⁷⁰

Racial barriers to participation often overlap with and are compounded by income barriers.

Consequently, family income has a significant impact on the gender gap in sports participation rates. Black and minority girls from low-income communities have less support and resources to play.

E. The state of sports participation for Black children in Columbus

Central Ohio is no exception to these national trends. The Aspen Institute’s 2021 report “State of Play Central Ohio” envisions, “A Central Ohio in which every child has the opportunity to be active through sports, play and outdoor recreation.”⁷¹ The report sees this vision through by connecting community-centered data to the benefits of sports, including improved cognitive skills, mental health, educational outcomes, and physical health. “State of Play Central Ohio” concludes, “financial barriers impact sports participation for Black children more than White children.”⁷² Some key takeaways from the report include,:

Twenty percent of youth surveyed in Central Ohio said they do not play sports more often due to financial costs associated with participation. Costs affected Black youth (28%) more than White youth (18%), and elementary school students (29%) more than those in middle school (19%) and high school (14%)... Coaches identified funding and facility space as the most important needs for youth sports teams, with urban communities needing more help than suburban and rural areas. Urban coaches were four times as likely as suburban coaches and twice as likely as rural coaches to identify transportation as a barrier.⁷³

There is also disparity in access to safe play spaces. In the Aspen Institute's survey, white youth reported feeling safer than Black youth.⁷⁴ Safe play spaces were severely limited during the

height of the COVID-19 pandemic in Columbus, when public recreational sites were closed. The Aspen Institute's local report highlights that Columbus, a city filled with energy over collegiate and professional sports, often lacks the infrastructure and support for youth sports, specifically in minority communities. This characterization of racial disparities in Columbus youth sports specifies the national data, bringing my argument closer to home.

F. The quality of life for Black girls in Columbus

Data on the quality of life for Black girls in Columbus corroborates the national research: Black girls in Columbus face aggravated racial, economic, and cultural barriers to sports participation. The Commission on Black Girls, spearheaded by Columbus City Councilmember Priscilla R. Tyson, analyzes the academic experience, economic context, and support for mental health and emotional well-being for Black girls in Columbus. To begin with academic experience, white women in Columbus are slightly more likely to have at least a high school degree than Black women.⁷⁵ Subsequently, white women surpass Black women in earned bachelor's degrees and future income.⁷⁶ Additionally, intensified disciplinary punishment is a barrier to academic achievement for Black girls. Nationally, according to the U.S. Department of Education, 2% of white girls have been suspended compared with 12% of Black girls.⁷⁷ Additionally, the Department of Education found that Black students represent 16% of the student population in their data snapshot, but account for 42% of multiple suspension incidents.⁷⁸ In Columbus, school disciplinary rates are also high. According to responses from the Commission's surveyed Black female students, 9% have been expelled and 40% have received an out-of-school suspension.⁷⁹ Disciplinary rates for Black girls in Columbus tends to peak in late middle school and early high school. There are setbacks to stability and discipline in the lives of Black girls in Columbus.

Finally, while these findings indicate added hardship in school for Black girls, survey respondents reported positive academic experiences. 60% of surveyed girls have a GPA higher than 2.6, including 41% with a GPA in the A range (3.1 or higher).⁸⁰ 85% of surveyed girls said they could go to college if they wanted to. The most frequently listed ideal careers from surveyed girls include lawyer, doctor, and nurse. Black girls in Columbus are determined and optimistic. The compounded obstacles Black girls face relative to white girls must be specifically addressed and responded to in Title IX-related policy, so that this determination and optimism can be translated to sports as well.

The economic context for Black girls in Columbus also spurs setbacks. As of 2016 U.S. Census estimates, there are approximately 50,000 Black girls and young women in Columbus ages 24 and under.⁸¹ According to 2017 U.S. Census estimates, 48% of all Black children under age 18 in Columbus live in poverty.⁸² Additionally, Black girls in Columbus are less likely than white girls to live in houses owned by their parents: only about 34% of housing units occupied by Black householders in Columbus are owner-occupied, compared to 51% among white householders.⁸³ With lower family income levels, Black girls in Columbus grow up with food insecurity, housing instability, and unaffordable health care costs. Gender equity for Black girls in youth sports starts outside the classroom, in communities that provide a backdrop of support and safety. Access to good healthcare, proper nutrition, and stable housing allow students to reap the benefits of school and extracurriculars. For instance, if a student is worried about their job to help pay rent, or the long travel time to the closest grocery store, there is little chance they can prioritize sports, let alone their academics. Additionally unaffordable or inaccessible health care deters sports participation. An injury could halt participation indefinitely without proper treatment. Title IX can only be meaningful if it has community stability to support it.

Finally, The Commission on Black Girls surveyed about the mental health and emotional well-being of Black girls in Columbus. The findings are tragic: Half of the girls surveyed reported having been bullied at school and 20% reported being bullied directly on social media.⁸⁴ Specifically, 22% of surveyed girls have been bullied or harassed a few times because of their skin color, and 9% have been bullied or harassed a lot because of their skin tone.⁸⁵ A comment by an attendee at one of the Commission's listening sessions exemplifies this trend: "One of our biggest challenges is lack of self-confidence. We experience the things other girls experience with the addition of racial negativity."⁸⁶ Bullying and other threats to mental health are onerous for Black girls in Columbus. This includes sexual violence and exploitation. 21% of all survey respondents said they had experienced unwanted sexual contact.⁸⁷ It also includes implications of mass incarceration. The incarceration of a parent implicates mental health, and a staggering 58% of surveyed girls said they had at least one parent who had been arrested at some point in the past.⁸⁸ Finally, almost 30% of survey respondents said they were always or most times depressed.⁸⁹ The Commission's findings suggest that Black girls in Columbus face severe threats to their mental and emotional health, including bullying, safety concerns, adverse childhood experiences, and mental illness. Mirroring the national data, Black girls in Columbus face serious setbacks during adolescence. To reiterate, female athletes fare better academically, cognitively, and with mental and physical health relative to girls not involved in sports. Thus, policymakers have all the more reason to address the shortcomings of Title IX to improve sports participation for Black girls, for the sake of their well-being and futures.

G. Conclusion

The data shows that Title IX does not do enough for Black girls. Despite Title IX's promise to protect against sex-based discrimination, Black girls remain vulnerable to gender

inequity in sports, often resulting from lack of resources in Black communities. There have been overall strides to close the gender gap in sports participation since Title IX's passage. According to Charlotte Gibson for *ESPN*, "the National Federation of State High School Associations reports 'girls' high school participation also reached an all-time high in 2017-18 for the 29th consecutive year with 3,415,306 opportunities for girls to compete."⁹⁰ Nevertheless, as a result of compounded hardship and lack of financial resources in disadvantaged communities, Black girls still experience lower rates of sports participation and higher rates of dropouts than white girls. In order to achieve authentic gender equity in sports, across racial and economic categories, Title IX-related policy must specifically address the unique experiences and needs of Black female athletes.

Opening the Doors to West High School: The Status of Gender Equity in Athletics

A. Introduction to findings on gender equity within West High School Athletics.

The following case study on West High School in Columbus, Ohio is based on enrollment and demographic data and a series of interviews with West High School teachers, coaches, and a female volleyball athlete (there is only a girls volleyball team). The three coaches I interviewed were Sharon, a volleyball coach, Connor an assistant boys soccer coach, and Mwaliko, the head boys soccer coach and the only Somali-speaking staff member at West High School. The experience of female athletes of color at West High School corroborates the preceding chapter's national research in numerous ways and contradicts it in others. Most notably, girls at West High School participate in sports at a lower rate than their male peers. But girls, and specifically girls of color, do not suffer from severe dropout rates as national data indicates. Somali girls face the most severe barriers to sports participation, with extreme gendered expectations in their culture and families. The most pervasive theme was that the lack of youth sports opportunities and the lack of parent involvement are primary deterrents to girls sports participation at West High School. West High School is Title IX compliant, but gender inequity in athletics stems from the community and families.

B. West High School is Title IX Compliant.

There is not administrative gender discrimination in West High School's athletic department. Sharon said that she does not notice unequal treatment stemming from West High School or its athletic department's leadership. She noted that financial support for equipment and uniforms is not adequate, but it is not adequate "across the board." Sports teams at West High School receive equal treatment and endure equal disadvantage.

Sharon said that the school tries to promote gender equity. For instance, girls and boys sports play an equal number of games on “prime” night, or Friday nights. Unlike the traditional Friday Night Football stereotype, girls and boys teams have an equal number of “prime night spotlights.” Ronald Sayers, manager of membership and compliance at the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA), said this is a local school decision, and that the OHSAA does not regulate the days of the week on which schools must compete in specific sports. West High School goes above and beyond with its prime night rule.

Connor reiterated the school’s equitable treatment of boys and girls sports, saying, “it never seems like boys sports are prioritized over girls. And so, for me, I would have to think that that lack of involvement starts with attitudes at home.” West High School policies and practices seem equitable and fair. Inequity between male and female athletes stems from somewhere else, and Connor believes that it could stem from within families.

A volleyball athlete I spoke to said that girls and boys sports “are treated pretty equally. We all get the same opportunities. If you're talking about jerseys and stuff... it's pretty level.” From this female athlete’s perspective, the school treats male and female athletes comparably.

West High School’s Athletic Department is Title IX compliant. It has an equal number of male and female sports teams, provides male and female athletes with equal opportunities, and equips them with comparable equipment and uniforms. It additionally promotes gender equity by mandating that an equal number of Friday night sports games are played by girls and boys teams. Lack of gender equity in sports at West High School is real, specifically for girls of color and most severely for Somali girls, but it does not stem from administrative discrimination.

- C. There are lower rates of sports participation, but not high dropout rates, among girls at West High School.

The national research indicates increased dropout rates from sports for Black girls, but this is not a significant issue at West High School. Based on Sharon's experience at West High School, there are "maybe a few dropouts, but not many. It seems like if they're in it, and they like it, they're sticking with it." The issue at West High School is getting female athletes of color involved in the first place, rather than getting female athletes of color to stay involved. Sharon believes that her athletes are generally happy playing sports and enjoy them. She compared this observation to her coaching experience in a suburban school district, where girls often saw athletic participation as an expectation. In suburbia, sports came with pressure. In contrast, Sharon said that sports are an "escape" to female athletes at West High School. The volleyball athlete I spoke to called sports a "positive experience," "a good way to focus," and "a good way to find hobbies." Sports are a positive in the lives of female athletes at West High School. Girls are not quitting high school sports in high numbers, but West High School needs to inspire initial participation among its female students.

Connor doubled down on this point. He said he definitely sees a difference in the male athlete's experience and the female athlete's experience at West High School. He added, "there is way more involvement from male athletes." Connor described the beginning of the season for the basketball and soccer teams: "Every year it feels like it's a given that the boys basketball team and soccer team have good numbers." On the other hand, the girls volleyball and softball teams "are fighting to field a team." Girls teams experience lower levels of interest and participation than their male counterparts at West.

To Connor, this participation gap between boys and girls teams "comes back to the families and maybe gender roles within families." Connor reiterated that the resources available to the boys and girls sports teams are equal, and that the participation gap is not coming from

school policy or practices. To Connor, the noticeable difference in sports involvement for boys and girls is not a matter of inequitable treatment from the administration, but rather reflects cultural norms and family priorities.

To the volleyball athlete, male students go out for sports in larger numbers than their female peers. She claimed this with “one hundred percent certainty.” She compared the boys and girls basketball teams. While the boys team tryouts are full, the girls tryouts have less than ten players. She attributed this to girls not wanting to play as much as boys, but also to many girls not being allowed to play. She said, “I know a couple people that are not allowed to play because of their culture and their parents.” Female students face barriers to sports participation from home. Additionally, the volleyball athlete said she does not feel like there is a dropout rate among female athletes. She said, “Once they're involved, they like it. I hardly know anyone that quits sports. They usually stick around.” West High School does not face a major problem with girls quitting sports but must increase initial interest and involvement in sports among its female students.

D. There is a dropout rate when students transition from middle school to high school.

Students on Columbus’s West Side do drop out of sports when they transition from middle school to high school. While an activity bus drives the athletes home from practices and games at the middle school level, this service is not offered in high school. Sharon cited lack of transportation as a reason for drop-offs in participation between middle school and high school.

Sharon also noted that academic eligibility requirements contribute to a drop-off trend between the middle school and high school level. There are academic stipulations for middle school athletics, but they are not as stringent as in high school. At the high school level, academic eligibility requirements are a pervasive barrier to athletic participation.

E. Gender norms within the Somali community severely inhibit sports participation for Somali girls.

According to Sharon, “the biggest group of athletes of color that is affected by being female is probably the Somali population [because] of the expectations in most homes. [As a girl], you are to be home doing chores, taking care of kids, and cooking.” Sharon exposed a trend for many Somali girls at West High School: “They get a lot of grief from home, especially moving into high school, for not being home and helping mom raise younger siblings or helping mom cook.” There are expectations on Somali high school girls to take on household chores and child rearing. Sharon noted that mothers call Somali female athletes, who are supposed to be practicing, and say “you have to come home and cook, or we’re going to laundromat, or I need you at home to babysit.” When I asked whether Sharon thinks that Somali male athletes receive phone calls like this, she said no. She says this domestic work is a female obligation in Somali families.

Connor reiterated this point. He said that soccer is the most popular sport in the Somali community, but while he has fifteen male Somali soccer players, there is not a single female Somali soccer player on the girls team. Gender roles within Somali families inhibit sports participation for Somali girls.

Mwaliko agreed that gendered expectations to stay home, do chores, and look after the kids are a barrier to sports participation for Somali girls. He does not think this stems from failures at the school. To Mwaliko, it stems from lack of support at home and lack of sports and cultural education for Somali parents.

The volleyball athlete said there are different gender norms in the Somali community, and that Somali homes are stricter and more conservative homes. She said that Somali girls are

often limited to “school stuff, taking care of the kids, and cleaning.” She added, “not a lot of them play sports.” She said that Somali parents “most definitely” let boys play sports more than girls.

Sharon detailed the split attitude of Somali female athletes towards their gendered responsibilities. Some are “irritated and frustrated,” while others accept these responsibilities, including practice-disrupting phone calls, as a fact of life. Sharon articulated this line of thought as, “Well obviously, of course, I [the athlete] would miss practice because I have to take care of [domestic responsibility].” Practice comes secondary to household responsibilities for many Somali girls, and many Somali girls are willful and obedient to their community’s gender norms.

Somali female athletes at West High School also face unique cultural expectations, some of which can be socially isolating and financially burdensome. For Somali girls on the volleyball team, uniforms must be adjusted to adhere to religious rules. While the rest of the volleyball team wears black spandex, many Somali athletes need most of their legs covered. Somali volleyball players typically wear ankle-length leggings or mesh basketball shorts. Most also have to wear a hijab while they play.

Somali families struggle to understand the value of sports to girls, and this struggle is only a facet of overall language and educational barriers to cultural understanding. Many Somali girls at West High School are not vaccinated. It is rare for a Somali girl to get her driver’s license before she is 18. It is also rare that Somali girls are encouraged to get a job after high school. Their freedom is explicitly more restricted than Somali boys at West High School. Connor articulated this point. He said that the Somali population at West High School is particularly disadvantaged relative to other ethnic groups, and he attributed this to a severe language barrier for Somali parents. He also said that parental involvement and support in athletics is particularly

absent for Somali girls at West High School. Parents are generally frustrated when girls come home late from school because they have been at practice.

There are deep connections and shared norms within the Somali community.

Accordingly, there is reason to be optimistic, because Somali female athletes can inspire other Somali girls to join their team. Sharon notes that Somali female athletes on the volleyball team have a significant impact on their Somali peers. She reflected that if she has one Somali athlete, they can inspire two or three friends to play with them. Additionally, because many Somali students live in the same area, transportation is easier for Somali athletes who play the same sport together. According to Sharron, she only needs to make one car trip to drive her Somali athletes home every night.

F. The language barrier severely limits sports participation for Somali girls.

Sharon says that her Somali female athletes struggle, in part, because of communication barriers for their families. She says that these athletes would benefit from a community liaison that communicates the schedule of school sports and the virtues of playing sports. Sharon explained the need for “having translators or people from their community that understand sports for females and can, in their language, express to them the benefits of girls being involved in sports, and the positives that can come with them, from school to social to work ethic... There's a big disconnect between the [Somali] community and the school community literally because there's a communication barrier.” Sharon says that there are Young Life and mentorship programs that support these families. However, Mwaliko, the head boys soccer coach and teacher’s instructional assistant, is the only Somali-speaking staff member in the entire school. Additionally, Somali parents are almost completely absent from sports games. For example, Sharon remembers some Somali families showing up on Senior Night, but she had never seen

them prior to that — during their child’s entire four years on her team. She attributes this to cultural differences, but mostly the lack of translation and educational resources to close gaps in understanding.

G. Financial barriers inhibit sports participation for girls

The financial barriers to sports participation at West High School, for male and female athletes, are glaring. For instance, Sharon recounted a time she asked a junior varsity volleyball player to play on the varsity team for a tournament. The student responded that she could not play, saying, “my mom doesn't have gas and doesn't get paid till tomorrow.” Financial hardship inhibits consistent participation in sports practices and games, adding psychological stress too.

According to Sharon, the disadvantage of her female athletes of color compared with girls in other school districts does not only stem from the school district’s limited resources. Other schools are not necessarily giving more money to their teams than West High School. Instead, Sharon says, “their parents are buying them their equipment. Their parents are buying them practice shorts.” For instance, Sharon often purchases secondhand volleyball shoes and knee pads for her athletes, and many of these athletes would not know to buy them or could buy them otherwise. Additionally, Sharon says that it is her white female athletes that are more likely to buy their own shoes and other supplies. Sharon also said that this was not her experience working in rural and suburban school districts. Parents almost always bought equipment and uniforms for athletes, with the exception of one athlete about every few years that she would help. In the rural and suburban school districts, other parents would even step in and run a fundraiser to help a financially disadvantaged athlete. This speaks to decreased parent involvement at West High School relative to other school districts. It also corroborates the national research that financial hardship overlaps with and exacerbates racial hardships.

West High School provides its volleyball athletes with a jersey but encourages girls to purchase their own spandex. Sharon typically purchases 10 or so pairs of spandex in case there are athletes that cannot afford them otherwise. Sharon notes that it is common for her athletes to not have sports bras, and that the coaches have solicited companies to donate batches of sports bras for their athletes. According to Sharon, juniors and seniors, who tend to get jobs over the summer, typically have sports bras and volleyball shoes more often than the underclassmen, who are less likely to have a summer job. West High School only guarantees a jersey to its volleyball players, and beyond the jersey, spandex, shoes, and other attire are provided on an as needed basis, mostly out of the coaches' pockets.

Incentive to work is a major obstacle to sports participation at West High School. Connor said, "I see the biggest barrier for students to sports is feeling either this pressure or this desire to work, whether it's pressure to help their family, or desire to just have some pocket change. It's a pretty common trend, where the biggest obstacle for kids is whatever their work schedule is." Connor added that any policy that could relieve the burden to work would drive sports participation up significantly.

H. Lack of Parent Involvement deters sports participation.

Parent involvement is particularly limited for female athletes at West High School. According to Connor, parent involvement at West High School is defined by a "lack of engagement." He said that parent participation in extracurriculars is "really low." Sharon has past work experience in a rural Kentucky School District and in a blue-collar, suburban Ohio School District. When asked what the key differences are between her past teaching experiences and her experience at West High School, she responded, "the biggest difference is just parent involvement, like in the classroom, in sports, and across the board, it's parental involvement."

According to Sharon, there is far less parent involvement at West High School than in the other school systems. She said, “Again, parental support... in the other schools where I taught, I knew everybody's parents. Here, I've known and coached girls, some of them for four, five, or six years because I had them in the middle school basketball program. And I've literally seen their parents twice.” Sharon also said, generally, that “parents don’t come to the games.” Sharon said that the lack of parental involvement is especially bad for her female athletes of color, reiterating that girls from minority communities face additional obstacles and lack of support in their high school athletic experiences.

Sharon spoke about the comparative difference in parent involvement for male and female athletes of color, stating, “There is more parental involvement for male students of color... I would say definitively.” She said that this is obvious based on parent turnouts at boys football, basketball, and soccer games when compared to the girls games. Sharon also talked about the lack of parent involvement with transportation support. Coaches end up picking up athletes and driving them home. Furthermore, parental involvement is particularly bad in the Somali community. Both Sharon and Connor corroborated this. Connor added that “language plays a big part” in low levels of Somali parent involvement.

I. Lack of transportation accessibility hinders sports participation.

In middle school on Columbus’s West Side, sports practices run shorter and end earlier than the practices at the high school level. There is an “activity bus” (a traditional school bus) that takes students home after sports practices and games, so parents do not have to. At West High School, this is not offered. The responsibility falls on the coaches to bring athletes home, or for athletes to find their way home themselves. Sharon notes, “At the end of practice, we either take kids home, or they have to get a ride. Whereas in middle school, you had to end practice at

4:30, and if kids needed a ride home, there was a bus driver there.” At the high school level, coaches end up driving athletes home. Insecure and inconsistent transportation after sports practices and games limits sports participation for girls and boys alike.

J. Lack of youth sports programs limits high school sports participation.

Sharon was asked what the biggest differences are in the coaching experience at West High School compared to her experiences in rural and suburban districts. One of the two biggest differences she identified is lack of youth sports participation. In her words, “In suburbia... a lot of kids play from a young age, like organized sports at a young age. That is not the case in the inner city.” Connor noted the same phenomenon, citing limited access from childhood as a key reason for low participation rates. Connor knows of two youth soccer programs in the community. One focuses on the Hilltop neighborhood generally, while the other focuses on the South Park apartments specifically. Even so, Connor said that if athletes want higher quality youth sports with higher quality coaching, they have to leave the community. He said, “In so many suburban schools, you grow up and you're playing club year-round. There are not families in our community that have the kind of money to devote to that.” According to Connor, an “incredibly high concentration” of students at West High School live below the poverty line, and these families are certainly not allocating limited money to youth sports.

The volleyball player said she did not feel like she had youth sports opportunities. She added that she did not know of any. She recalled the community recreation center that a boys soccer team played at, but that was it. As much as she enjoys sports now, she did not play any sports until the seventh grade, when middle school sports teams began. In the seventh grade, she played volleyball and softball and experimented with other sports too. The interviewee also sees the lack of youth sports as a major obstacle to sports participation, saying, “When they don't

have any previous experience, they are less likely to join.” This reiterates the national research indicating disparity in club and privately organized sports participation between white and Black female athletes.

K. Lack of safe places to live and play

The lives of many students at West High School are adjacent to violence and crime. Connor specifically noted that many of his Somali soccer athletes live in the South Park apartment complex. To Connor, “it feels like there's a shooting there every week.” He recalled one week in the summer with three shootings at South Park. Connor described the lives of his athletes at South Park as ones with “a level of grief and trauma attached, because they can’t even go outside their apartment complex at night and be confident that nothing bad will happen to them, even though they’re not part of what’s going on... It’s a really tough thing for them, emotionally, psychologically, just being so surrounded by violence that they’re not a part of.” Connor added that the fact that Somali students live in the apartment complex that is particularly dangerous adds to their already severe hardships.

Sports are not the priority for families who live on the frontlines of violence. Areas like South Park are so dangerous that it is not easy for kids to play outside. To Mwaliko, there are sufficient parks and fields in the community, but they are not sufficiently safe. He said, “I will say there are parks around us, but the question is, are they safe? Is it a good practice, a good playgrounds space you want to take your son or daughter to?... There is a lot of smoking [in our parks] and a lot of cursing or people smoking. People mislearn from that.” Parks in the community are not what people envision when they think of a safe play space. When I asked Mwaliko his thoughts on the status of violence and crime in the community, his response was

brief and explicit: “Young kids — smoking, drinking, dying.” Youth sports programs have no foundation in communities that are unsafe, as is often the case on Columbus’s West Side.

L. Facility deterioration

Sharon made clear that West High School facilities have been “neglected” by Columbus City Schools. She caveated that West High School has wonderful programming, like a STEM program that American Electric Power (AEP) helps with and classes from Columbus State Community College. According to Sharon, “I do think there's a lot of opportunity at this high school, but I would say our facilities are definitely probably some of the worst in the city.” She called the softball field and tennis courts “awful.” Additionally, the most prominent athletic facility issue is West High School’s gymnasium. Its floor was recently redone, along with almost every other school in the district. But West High School’s gym is notoriously small, labeled as “middle school sized” by the coaches at West and other Columbus residents. According to Sharon, this limits the capability of the volleyball and basketball team. For instance, in a standard gym (which most other schools have), teams can practice with dual volleyball nets. At West High School, they cannot.

I asked the volleyball player, “If you had a magic wand, and could change anything you want about the athletic or academic experience at West High School, would you make any changes, and if so, what would those changes be?” Her response reiterated the severity of facility deterioration. She said she would change the school building, noting, “In classrooms that are a lot more clean and put together, there’s better performance.” She added that when classrooms are dirty and old, “like when the paint is ripping off the wall,” it is more difficult to focus. When I asked her to clarify what West High School classrooms are like, she said they are like the latter scenario, the classrooms with paint peeling off the wall. She summarized, “This is a pretty old

building... a lot of it needs to be fixed.” Finally, the volleyball athlete commented on the small size of the gym, and that it would be nice to have a bigger one.

M. Inadequate Nutritional Support

A top priority to Mwaliko is getting his athletes proper nutrition before practices and games. West High School does not provide any snacks to athletes for sports. Students come to Mwaliko, saying, they are starving after the school day, and they are then expected to run for two to three straight hours. Mwaliko also noted, “Sometimes mom and dad are not home and out working. When they go home and nothing is cooked, they have to wait an additional two, three hours to eat.” One athlete did not come to soccer practice this season. When Mwaliko asked why, the athlete said it was because he was hungry. This was not a one-time occurrence. For that reason, Mwaliko purchases bananas, grapes, apples, and oranges for his students. The school does not provide any snacks to athletes. Everything is out of the pockets of coaches.

N. Disillusionment and discouragement among female athletes of color

It seemed that disillusionment and discouragement among her athletes was Sharon’s harshest reflection during our interview. In a somber tone, Sharon said, “Our student athletes are almost delusional or unaware of what it’s like anywhere else.” Sharon described bringing her volleyball team to the end of the year tournament, the sectional tournament. Throughout the season, her team mostly plays schools in the city league. Nevertheless, schools across the city play one another in the sectional tournament at the end of the season to hopefully qualify for the district tournament and then the state championship. The sectional tournament is traditionally held at a bigger, wealthier, and suburban high school. Sharon describes the shock her athletes experience walking into these types of schools. The school looks rich, and the girls look rich. According to Sharon, suddenly, “[my athletes] are very well aware of it. And they get stomped.

We are generally a very good program in the city. But we go out there and it's like their middle schools would beat us blankly.” Sharon says the shock and intimidation factor “one hundred percent” mentally affect her athletes. She elaborated, “Their gym is ginormous. They’re 15 state championship banners when you walk in, and everybody's wearing the same pair of team shoes and the same pullover... That's just not what we physically look like when we show up.” In competition, she said often “the wheels fall off. I think mentally our athletes are not in the same place as suburban athletes that have been doing it their entire lives.”

Sharon stipulated that she does mean to negate real hardships that girls in suburban schools face, but she said that their real issues are likely not added on top of worries like, “Am I going to eat? Am I going to be expected to get married when I am 19? And other things that our athletes of color probably have to think about.” Girls of color at West High School face compounded hardship — financial, psychological, cultural, and familial — and this inhibits their participation in sports.

Supplementing Title IX with Community-Centered Solutions

A. Introduction

Access to young sports is negligible on the west side of Columbus. Families usually cannot afford club-based sports, nor are there sufficient transportation options to carpool children to other areas for practices. Parks and fields on the West Side are exposed to violence, drugs, and explicit language. Somali girls face cultural and religious gender norms that deter sports participation. They are often expected to cook dinner, do household chores, and take care of younger children rather than participate in extracurriculars. For all these reasons and more, low rates of participation of girls in sports plague West High School. Although West High School is Title IX compliant, Title IX is far from achieving authentic gender equity. Title IX threatens the loss of federal funding to programs that are noncompliant, but this law is not enough for schools like West High School — with large populations of low-income families and girls of color. Title IX leaves girls at West High School behind because it is reliant on a top-down approach of administrative punishment. To achieve authentic gender equity, West High School and similar schools need to supplement Title IX with a bottom-up approach that is community and culturally centered.

B. Youth sports programs must be established, expanded, and sustained as much as possible.

According to a Women's Sports Foundation's report, the participation rate for high school girls in towns and rural areas is twice that of girls in urban areas.⁹¹ In my research, every interviewee cited the lack of youth sports as a key barrier to sports participation at the high school level. If kids are not participating at the youth level, they are less likely to participate at the high school level. This is especially true for young girls, as stereotypes about types of play are formative at young ages. (i.e. that boys play sports and girls play house). Lack of youth

sports programs means that children and parents are less likely to see the academic, emotional, physical, and lifelong values in play. It also means that children are less likely to build a skillset that is competitive at the high school level. Finally, lack of youth sports means that girls' interest in sports may not be sparked until it is too late.

One solution is to reform gym class structure. The volleyball student-athlete noted that the only exposure she had to sports prior to the middle school level was during gym class. She remembered doing week-long units on specific sports, but more than anything else, playing a lot of dodgeball. At elementary schools on the West Side, a focused and intentional class plan for gym should be established. Improving gym class increases meaningful exposure to sports at a young age. Sports units should be more than a week-long and should teach the skills and rules of each sport, in addition to providing real play time. While there may be pushback from teacher unions, gym class reform is a low-cost method to incorporate sports in the lives of all students — regardless of gender, family, or cultural background.

Additionally, there should be outreach by City of Columbus and Columbus City Schools to professional sports teams and nonprofits that focus on sports programming. To residents of Columbus, Ohio, sports are everything. Ohio State Football, Columbus Blue Jackets Hockey, Columbus Crew Soccer, and fandom for professional teams in Cincinnati and Cleveland is palpable everywhere you go. Columbus City Schools and City of Columbus should lobby these wealthy teams to run sports camps in neighborhoods on Columbus's West Side. These programs would likely attract additional funding from the community because of their association with popular teams. Likewise, Columbus City Schools and City of Columbus should persuade sports-centered nonprofits to work on the West Side.

Finally, Columbus City Schools and City of Columbus must work jointly to establish permanent youth sports programming on the West Side. As described in Chapter 1, the return on investment is high. By Columbus investing in youth sports on the West Side, it is creating a safer, healthier, and more productive community. Sports participation reduces the risk of crime, strengthens leadership skills and work ethic, and improves physical and mental health. There should and must be public backing of youth sports programming on the West Side, where families often cannot financially commit to it. The interviewed volleyball athlete noted, “If [girls] play when they're younger, they kind of stick through it throughout high school.” Accessible and affordable youth sports programs are key to achieving gender equity at the high school level.

C. Busing after practices and games at the high school level

In middle school on Columbus’s West Side, there is an activity bus that takes students home after sports practices and games, so parents do not have to. The activity bus after practices and games must be expanded to the high school level. “I don’t have a ride” is a reason many students at West High School do not play sports and an excuse that many athletes have for missing commitments. This is especially pertinent for Somali girls. According to multiple coaches, it is rare for a Somali girl to get her driver’s license before she turns 18. School bus service must be expanded for high school athletes, so students, girls and boys alike, are not deterred from sports for a lack of a ride.

D. School-community liaison for the Somali community.

Every interviewee expressed a need for a school-community liaison that closes gaps in understanding. There is a lack of translation and educational resources within the Somali community. Because of cultural and language barriers, many Somali families do not understand

the value of sports to girls. The language barrier also inhibits families from understanding the sports schedule. High school sports begin August 1, but Sharon noted that Somali families often do not understand or know about sports scheduling, including practice times and games, because of language differences. Throughout the interview, she reiterated multiple times the need for a school-community liaison. Sharon said,

“I feel like having some sort of school-community liaison where somebody can quite literally speak to them in their language. And like I said, push the benefits of girls being involved in sports at a young age. I feel like maybe they don't see the benefit of it; all they see is what's being taken away from home. I don't know that they see, or if they see how it can benefit their daughter. So, I think [one solution is] just having someone who maybe understands their community and then literally can speak to them in a language and in a way that they understand.”

As highlighted in Chapter 3, gender norms within the Somali community are strict and severe, deterring many young girls from sports and other extracurriculars. These families' values become insular without proper translation and communication services with the school and their community. Language accessible outreach and educational programming is crucial to increasing sports participation for Somali girls.

E. Hire more staff that speak Somali

Additionally, West High School should hire additional staff who speak Somali whenever possible. There is one staff member in the entire school that speaks Somali, and there are hundreds of Somali students. That one staff member is Mwaliko, the head boys soccer coach and teacher's instructional assistant. Connor, the assistant boys soccer coach, told me, “[Mwaliko] helps bridge the gap by communicating with parents, but he's just one person. And there's

hundreds of students who need that gap to be bridged. And so, there are some that still fall through the cracks in terms of being able to communicate with parents.” West High School could solicit Ohio State University students in the Somali program. The school could also hire people bilingual in English and Somali as language liaisons, so they can be hired even if they lack academic credentials. More Somali-speaking staff members is a necessary step to combat the language barrier to Somali girls’ sports participation and the overall marginalization of the Somali community.

F. The City of Columbus should consider a graduated stipend program for play.

Chapter 3 addressed the financial barriers to sports participation at West High School. Many students opt out of sports to get a job. Mwaliko noted that nearly no students bring snacks for sports practices. Sharon noted the lack of financial support from families for equipment and uniforms. Her athletes have relied on donations for sports bras. Sharon herself buys spandex and shoes for many of her athletes. Low-income families at West High School face financial obstacles to sports participation.

Relieving the financial incentive to work would increase sports participation. The City of Columbus should consider implementing a graduated stipend program to families in Columbus City Schools whose children play school-sponsored sports. The program would be based on family income, and eligibility could be determined by students who qualify for subsidized lunch. It would modestly compensate families for the opportunity cost of children not receiving a paycheck. It could even be spent on the sports gear and supplies that many low-income athletes lack. Connor said, “I think taking some of that burden off of young people to help provide financially... would incentivize playing sports.” He added, “anything that increases access and incentivizes kids to be involved is going to be really helpful in the long run.” Financial

constraints deter sports participation for the many low-income students at West High School because many students would prefer to have a job. Financial constraints also make sports participation more difficult, and students often rely on coaches to provide gear and snacks out of pocket. A financial stipend to families helps minimize the financial tradeoff and burden of sports participation.

G. Snack and dinner as nutritional and financial incentives to participate in sports.

Columbus City Schools should provide snacks to athletes after the school day before practices and games. The school currently does not provide any snacks to athletes. Any snacks are provided out of pocket by the coaches. Mwaliko noted that it is outrageous when we accept that professional athletes should eat before and after training, yet West High School athletes are running around for two or three hours without food since lunch. These athletes often go home, and nothing is cooked yet, and they have to wait even longer. One athlete did not come to Mwaliko's practice. When Mwaliko asked why, the athlete said it was because he was hungry. He disliked the school lunch that day. Mwaliko noted that his athletes often come to him, "saying they are starving," and that is why he purchases bananas, grapes, apples, and oranges and keeps them in his office.

Columbus City Schools must provide pre-practice snacks, not only for the sake of sports participation, but for the sake of proper nutrition. Snacks should be allocated to coaches for pre-practice distribution, and they should include nutritious choices whenever possible, like fruit or granola bars. Students should not be deterred from after school play because they are hungry. Athletes should not feel hungry going into a practice or a game. This hurts the health of students, and it harms their academic and athletic performance.

Columbus City Schools should also consider providing dinner to athletes when practices or games are late at night. Many students rely on West High School for breakfast and lunch. Prospects of a late-night dinner for some students is uncertain. By providing a basic meal option after late-night play, high school sports become a safe space where students can fuel their bodies and minds. Although it would be costly to hire kitchen staff outside normal hours, a dinner program also relieves the burden on students and families to provide a late-night meal themselves. As West High School stands, there is nutritional deficit and financial burden in sports play. Providing after-school snacks and a dinner option when practices and games run late could alleviate these challenges.

H. Facility Improvements

Every interviewee mentioned the deteriorating conditions of facilities at West High School. All four mentioned the small gym size. The volleyball student-athlete noted paint peeling off the classroom walls. The tennis courts, softball field, and track are in awful condition. The track was described as a concrete loop; it is in such bad condition that athletes go to a different school to run. Students learn better in classrooms that are well-kept. Students are empowered to play sports when they have adequate fields and facilities to use. Columbus City Schools and the City of Columbus owe it to students at West High School to provide them with functional and sufficient play and educational facilities.

I. Philanthropy

It is the responsibility of Columbus City Schools and City of Columbus to implement many of the changes necessary at West High School to increase girls participation in sports. These are changes that apply from the youth to the high school level and that improve athletic and academic conditions overall. However, I would be remiss if I did not point out that change at

West High School can be made with checks. The generosity of donors could go a long way in providing sports bras and shoes, after-school snacks, nonprofit youth sports programs, facility improvements, and more. West High School students face an opportunity gap relative to wealthier schools because of financial hardship. Financial hardship is a key reason Title IX falls short of achieving authentic gender equity at West High School. The only thing standing between sports bra donations or the resurfacing of the track — is money. Systemic change requires financial backing. This is an appeal for generosity from anyone who feels called to do so.

Conclusion

Title IX is commemorative, rather than productive, for low-income girls of color. This is evident at West High School in Columbus, Ohio. West High School's athletic program is Title IX compliant. However, on Columbus's West Side, lack of youth sports opportunities leads to gaps in participation at the high school level. Inadequate transportation as well as inadequate financial and nutritional support also inhibit play. Somali girls face even harsher obstacles to play, suffering from strict gender norms and cultural and language barriers between their families, the school, and the community. Title IX is important, but a school can comply with Title IX and still fall short of equal opportunity for sports participation. Title IX is a top-down approach of administrative punishment. For Title IX to achieve authentic gender equity, it must be supplemented by a bottom-up, grassroots approach that focuses on individual community needs.

In the pursuit of future research, there should be on-the-ground research done at West High School and on Columbus's West Side. Advocates and policymakers should interview more teachers, coaches, students, and student-athletes. While I interviewed a student-athlete, that should be supplemented with interviews with the students who choose not to play. The facilities at West High School should be observed in person, as well as the conditions of parks and fields in the area. Research should be done on nonprofit groups that can mobilize youth sports programming in the area, and outreach should be done to The Ohio State University and Columbus's professional sports teams for their involvement. Advocates should also appeal to Elizabeth Brown, Columbus City Council Pro Tempore, Education Committee Chair, and Recreation and Parks Committee Chair. If future researchers want to analyze how Title IX fares in other schools and neighborhoods, it is crucial to pursue an individualized research project. My

findings on West High School may generalize to other low-income, majority-minority schools. But as this thesis argues, schools and communities have culturally-specific needs that must be addressed through grassroots research and grassroots solutions.

This thesis is a call to action. Columbus's West Side needs to establish, expand, and sustain youth sports programming. There must be transportation provided after practices and games at the high school level. There must be community-school liaisons and more school staff that educate in Somali on the value of girls sports. We must dismantle financial and nutritional barriers to participation and improve the conditions of facilities and the safety of parks. Systemic change necessitates political and financial support. Columbus's elected officials and donors have the lives of West High School students in their hands. They must take action — for the sake of girls and boys who are entitled to the right to play and the right to improve their life outcomes in the process.

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