

## Seeking success through sports

### City schools boost athletics to engage students

**BRIAN SHARP AND JAMES JOHNSON @SHARPROC @JJDANDC** Walking between the lines of young football players, coach Jason Muhammad shouted commands mixed with encouragement, at times carrying on a one-sided conversation, punctuated by clapping. ♦ “Got a little crowd out here. All right, all right. Sunshine!” he observed as long shadows from his players doing warm-ups stretched across the East High field. “Line ‘em up! Do what we do.”

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City athletic combine

The *Democrat and Chronicle*, UR Medicine Sports Medicine and the Rochester School District are partnering on a free sports combine to evaluate student-athletes in city schools for injury risks and help them improve performance.

The free combine is scheduled for 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Aug. 8 at East High School.

Registration is required as space is limited. To apply for a spot, contact your coach or athletic director. A follow-up session where participants and their coaches will receive individual and team reports is being scheduled.



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East High School's Eddy Fontan-Keating and Jesus Hernandez listen to Richard Gause, the junior varsity assistant offensive coordinator, before playing in a scrimmage at East High on Thursday.

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**Brandon Williams stretches with his Monroe High School teammates before the scrimmage at East High.**

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### Sports

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The Monroe squad in its blue uniforms and white helmets was one of three junior varsity teams taking the field on this day; one of nearly 100 new athletic teams that the Rochester School District has added in recent years. The district's concerted effort to reinvigorate its athletic and other extra-curricular programs aims to engage more students, and ultimately improve its sagging graduation rate. The district also is investing in equipment and facilities.

Monroe hasn't had varsity football in more than 30 years. And while the school had a partnership where students could play for Edison, many — if not most — of its current players haven't played since Pop Warner, if at all.

"Everything is new to them," Muhammad said. "Cleats are new to them. The practice jersey is new to them. A mouthpiece is new to them."

And, this past year, athletic trainers — the district hired a team of four — were new to them. That has been an adjustment.

"They just have this mindset: Play through it," said Chevonne Goff, a trainer working at Monroe and Wilson.

Nearly one of every two city students will participate in athletics during the upcoming school year, district projections show. That is up nearly 40 percent from four years ago. There are an estimated 99 additional programs being offered and the athletics budget has almost doubled to \$3.4 million since 2011-12, when Superintendent Bolgen Vargas was tapped to lead the district.

"It's more than the sport," Vargas said, noting that students must meet certain requirements in grades, attendance and character or citizenship to be eligible. "There is a strong association with playing a sport as a student and academic success. ... They are more likely to behave. They are more likely to have a better GPA and, most important, they are more likely to be successful in life."

For the same reason, the district also plans to add dozens of art and music teachers. It's like when you take a group photograph, Muhammad said. The first thing everyone does is find themselves in that photo.

"If they can see themselves in the picture, if they see they are involved in the picture (of their school), that's half the battle," he said. "The alpha male population is engaged in being positive."

Muhammad boasts that none of his players has been suspended. The district claims that its student-athletes have an aggregate attendance in excess of 92 percent. The district only started tracking athletic participation as a subset of its students in 2014-15.

High schools began adding sports and other extracurricular activities a century ago to instill "soft skills" — self-discipline, teamwork, leadership, strong work habits, renowned Harvard social scientist Robert Putnam recounted in his book, "Our Kids, The American Dream in Crisis." But there has been a widening participation gap nationwide between affluent and poor children over the past 15 years.

The gap can be attributed to offerings, academics, transportation, even cost of participation. Affluent parents are more able to afford those fees, Putnam wrote, and they face fewer obstacles to getting involved in their child's school, and supporting — as well as demanding — opportunities from sports to music to art to advanced placement classes. At Monroe, Muhammad recalls a math teacher coming to his office after one of his players passed the Regents exam, and writing a personal check to offset the expense of the summer football camps.

Monroe was one of four schools to add modified football for seventh- and eighth-graders last year, each drawing interest from more than 40 students. The school is fielding a junior varsity team this year and could add varsity next year, becoming just the fifth varsity football team in a district with roughly a dozen high schools.

"I missed the love of the game. I wanted to play for my school," said George Cotton, 16, a receiver and incoming junior at Monroe who stopped playing organized football when he was 12. There's something more: "A lot of people respect us."

In addition to adding modified teams across various sports, the district is reintroducing lacrosse and eyeing ice hockey in the near future. The first girls lacrosse team is slated for School of the Arts in spring 2016, said Carlos Cotto, the district's executive director for health, physical education and athletics.

"We're moving in the direction I don't think other urban districts are moving in," Cotto said. "They are always faced with the cuts."

The athletic trainers, hired as 10-month employees last year and made full time this month, have begun a pilot program with athletic directors this summer, keeping student-athletes engaged while working on core strength, conditioning, nutrition, hydration, and academic expectations for college. The city has no shortage of quality athletes, district officials said, but they haven't had the repetition, game experience or conditioning to keep up with suburban teams through four quarters.

In the suburbs, youth leagues and camps have developed into a feeder system for high school sports, keeping children involved almost year-round and providing an involvement with coaches and trainers from a young age, officials said. In Rochester, youth leagues are fragmented, with a dozen football programs, two soccer programs, varying baseball leagues. There are efforts to coordinate those efforts, find a common language, Cotto said, acknowledging: "It's been a monster."

"It's taking time to break the barriers," he said. "It's never been done, that I know of, in an urban district. ... But we can't give up. We can't allow those barriers to break this movement."

Changing the course of athletics in the district has been complicated.

Lagging participation and, in recent years, funding cuts have led the district to pair multiple schools into merged teams. Suburban districts have done the same for varying reasons — a move not always popular as teams can gain a competitive advantage by drawing players from multiple high schools. Those mergers in the city created issues with student schedules, and having to bus between campuses.

"The students never lost out on participating, just how they went about participating was different," Cotto said.

Cotto stands by the mergers, because to him, having no team equals a closed door for a student.

But school athletic directors and coaches acknowledge that students do back away from athletics when teams are combined. Mergers also don't always sit well when it comes to identifying teams. Vargas shares a story about walking into Monroe and seeing football players in Edison jerseys, and how he found that to be unusual.

"I've only been here two years," Edison athletic director Kyle Vacanti said. "There's a handful, more than a handful, of cases of kids that when I came in here had no business graduating, had no business going to college.

"Over the two years you could see how being part of the program, hanging out with the coaches ... being in my office and having me on them, they've changed. Their lives have changed, and they are getting an opportunity they probably wouldn't have without athletics."

That is the focus, not recapturing old glory and the long-gone days of the City-Catholic League. At least not yet.

"From what it was in its 'heyday,' we're a long ways away," said Otis Palmer, line coach for Monroe and a longtime coach in the district. "But we're making steps."

Back on that East High field, Muhammad scanned the other teams and coaching staffs for Wilson and East. The former Marshall coach pointed to past players, both on his own staff and others. A one-time star receiver. A quarterback from a championship team.

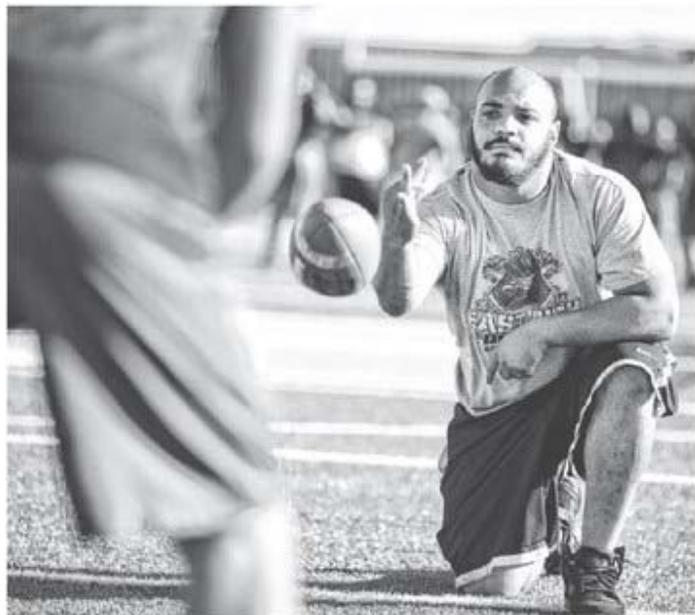
“Yes, it’s Wilson, Monroe, East,” the coach said. “But it’s the City School District, working with the same population of boys.”

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“There is a strong association with playing a sport as a student and academic success.”

**BOLGEN VARGAS**

SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS



**Brent McGill, defensive coordinator for East High School football, tosses a ball to a quarterback during warmups for a scrimmage at East High on Thursday.**

LAUREN PETRACCA/@LAURENPETRACCA/ STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



**John Washington, a sophomore at Monroe High School, warms up with another quarterback before a scrimmage Thursday.**

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