

The Role of Athletic Directors in Enhancing Social-Emotional Wellness and Health Literacy in Interscholastic Athletics

Casey Rudzinski

Online Graduate Professor

Newberry College

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of interscholastic Athletic Directors (ADs) in promoting social-emotional wellness (SEW) among student-athletes and enhancing the health literacy (HL) of sport coaches. Utilizing a qualitative, phenomenological approach, data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with ADs from various U.S. regions. The research highlights ADs' unique personal experiences, professional education, and resource access, which shape their perceptions and practices regarding SEW. ADs demonstrated resourcefulness, leveraging Athletic Trainers (ATs) as valuable SEW resources, aligning with research emphasizing ATs' roles in enhancing overall health and wellness. Additionally, time management emerged as a crucial factor for SEW education, as high school coaches often struggle with balancing time, knowledge, and resources for leadership development. The study also identified significant influences of parents and social media as both challenges and opportunities for SEW initiatives. The findings underscore the importance of professional development and credentials, with many ADs holding advanced degrees and NIAAA certifications. Emotional intelligence and leadership skills are essential for ADs to foster a supportive environment for coaches and student-athletes. ADs' diverse backgrounds, including experience as former student-athletes, coaches, and teachers, contribute to their multifaceted approach to managing emotions and promoting well-being. The study emphasizes the need for enhanced SEW resources and education in interscholastic athletics to foster better mental and physical health outcomes. Future research should focus on expanding the sample size and exploring specific areas of SEW in high school athletics, such as athlete identity and the Teacher-Coach role. By continuing to investigate these aspects, educators and administrators can develop more comprehensive programs to support the holistic development and well-being of student-athletes in interscholastic athletics.

Keywords: Social-emotional wellness, Mental health literacy, Interscholastic athletics, Mental health education

Social-emotional wellness (SEW) in interscholastic athletic directors (ADs) is crucial for addressing the challenges faced by student-athletes and the health literacy (HL) barriers sport coaches encounter. This study examines ADs' perceptions and practices concerning SEW and HL to improve available resources and strategies, using a qualitative, phenomenological approach with semi-structured interviews from various U.S. regions. The findings underscore the critical need for enhanced SEW resources and education in interscholastic athletics to foster better mental and physical health outcomes for the broader school community.

Literature Review

This study investigates the role of interscholastic athletic directors (ADs) in promoting social-emotional wellness (SEW) among student-athletes and enhancing the health literacy (HL) of sport coaches from both community and school-based perspectives. The research aims to identify the challenges high school ADs face in addressing SEW, particularly the barriers that hinder student-athletes from seeking help and the difficulties sport coaches encounter due to limited HL (Bu et al., 2020; Kroshus et al., 2019). Understanding SEW becomes increasingly critical as the focus on improving student-athlete experiences grows.

The conceptual framework of this study draws from the model for developing mental health education programs in Japan, which emphasizes a collective group effort for support. This model includes stakeholders, a working group, users, and educational resources (Ojio et al., 2020). In the context of education-based athletics, stakeholders encompass coaches, parents, and other staff connected to student-athletes (Hurley et al., 2018; Kroshus et al., 2019; Zdroik & Veliz, 2020). The working group consists of ADs, administrators, and school wellness staff like counselors and psychologists, while the users are the students participating in high school athletics. Educational resources include multimedia, filmed social contact, and educator manuals, which help in defining help-seeking behaviors, identifying barriers, and seeking health resources (Aguirre Velasco et al., 2020).

Luhmann's social systems theory underscores the self-management of adolescent athletes' health education, highlighting the importance of social support in alleviating symptoms like anxiety and depression (Powers et al., 2020). SEW involves individual help-seeking behaviors supported by a didactic network to enhance well-being (Aguirre Velasco et al., 2020; Hurley et al., 2018; Kutcher, Wei & Coniglio, 2016; Ojio et al., 2021). Cultural differences significantly impact the implementation of SEW programs,

with notable variations in countries such as Australia, Canada, and Japan (Hurley et al., 2018; Kutcher et al., 2016; Liddle et al., 2017; Mio & Matsumoto, 2018; Ojio et al., 2021).

The relationship between exercise, physical fitness, and stress management in adolescents is well-documented. High school sport participation has been associated with fewer panic symptoms and reduced anxiety subtypes (Ashdown-Franks et al., 2017). Schools with robust social-emotional values positively affect students' social well-being, work habits, and success beyond high school (Jackson et al., 2021). Programs within the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) emphasize the development of cognitive and communication skills critical in educational settings (Grijalva, 2019).

Historically, schools have emphasized physical education, integrating health components while recently expanding their focus to address mental health comprehensively, reflecting the rising awareness of mental health issues (Lindow et al., 2020). Schools serve as pivotal communities addressing mental health challenges and providing ongoing support for students and staff (Kreider, 2019; Mio & Matsumoto, 2018; Watson et al., 2019). Early promotion of positive mental health can improve mental health literacy and foster partnerships with local mental health professionals (Kreider, 2019). Education-based athletics is foundational for the overall education and well-being of student-athletes. High school ADs leverage their expertise to support both coaches and student-athletes amid increasing social and emotional challenges and heightened expectations for athletic and academic performance. Navigating these challenges is crucial for fostering a supportive environment (Donohue et al., 2018; Liddle et al., 2017; MacIntyre et al., 2017).

The importance of enhancing HL and SEW among interscholastic ADs, coaches, and student-athletes is evident. By addressing help-seeking behaviors and improving resources and support systems, ADs can significantly contribute to the well-being of student-athletes. This study expands the existing literature on wellness in interscholastic athletics, underscoring the need for ongoing research and practical applications to support SEW in high school athletics (Aguirre Velasco et al., 2020; Bu et al., 2020).

Methods

This qualitative, phenomenological study aimed to evaluate the perceptions and social-emotional wellness (SEW) practices of interscholastic Athletic Directors (ADs) in the U.S., focusing

on wellness education and handbook policies. The research explored barriers to help-seeking behaviors, SEW knowledge, and recognition of poor SEW symptoms to improve the lives of student-athletes and athletics staff. Data collection involved in-depth interviews with ADs from various states, representing diverse school settings and backgrounds. Open-ended, semi-structured questions were used to examine SEW literacy for coaches, help-seeking barriers, SEW knowledge, and SEW resources in athletic department policies. The data was transcribed, analyzed, and verified for accuracy and clarity through participant feedback, ensuring integrity and trustworthiness in the findings (Coombs, 2022).

Results

The study revealed several key themes regarding the perceptions and practices of interscholastic athletic directors (ADs) on social-emotional wellness (SEW) and health literacy (HL) among sport coaches and student-athletes. Interviews with ADs from six different states across the Midwest, Northeast, Pacific Northwest, and Southeast regions indicated that the average experience among participants was 15 years. Notably, three of the ADs had achieved the Certified Master of Athletic Administration (CMAA) certification, highlighting their advanced training and commitment to their roles. The ADs' backgrounds varied but generally included experience as former student-athletes, sport coaches, and physical education or health/wellness teachers, which informed their understanding and handling of SEW and HL challenges within their schools.

RQ1: How does SEW literacy affect high school ADs in helping coaches to improve confidence in their abilities to deal with social-emotional challenges of student-athletes?

When participants were asked about their health literacy (HL) in being able to help coaches handle the social-emotional challenges of student-athletes, 86% rated themselves a 7 or higher out of a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest). In terms of how ADs perceived what their coaches would say about their leadership in being able to help them improve their confidence in their abilities with SEW, feedback was mixed but overall self-assured. Reflecting upon their experiences and professional development, participants noted a larger role of other professionals SEW and HL as having a wider impact on coaches and student-athletes. Among those participants, 43% mentioned an athletic trainer (AT) in their response. AD6 noted, "When ATs saw a [SEW] need, they would address it."

Theme 1: Education and Athletics

Background of ADs.

The semi-structured interviews revealed that all participating athletic directors (ADs) shared similar backgrounds as former coaches, student-athletes, physical education (PE)/health teachers, or a combination thereof. For instance, AD2 and AD3 transitioned from coaching to AD roles, emphasizing the importance of mental health guidance and social media resources for their coaches, aligning with Kroshus et al.'s (2019) findings on coaches' roles in developing trusting relationships and detecting mental health symptoms in student-athletes. Hebard et al. (2021) noted that coaches often fulfill a parental role in student-athlete development. Similarly, AD7, a former PE/health teacher, and AD4, a former student-athlete, stressed the importance of expanding student identity beyond sports as an adaptive coping mechanism, supported by MacIntyre et al. (2017). AD1, with experience as both a teacher and coach, highlighted the growing attention to student-athlete mental health and wellness through various media. AD4 pointed out that proper leadership training fosters empathy and awareness beyond sports. These diverse backgrounds underscore the multifaceted roles of ADs in managing and regulating emotions for coaches and student-athletes, with emotional intelligence being crucial for promoting overall well-being (Lee, Richards, & Washburn, 2020), aligning with stakeholder theory's emphasis on understanding stakeholder behaviors and interests (Zdroik & Veliz, 2020).

Theme 2: Higher Education and Credential Background of ADs.

The academic qualifications and credentials of the ADs in this study emerged as a significant theme early in the sessions. Notably, 86% of the participants held a master's degree or higher, with four out of six ADs specifically having advanced degrees in education.

Additionally, five out of seven participants had earned NIAAA credentials of CAA (Certified Athletic Administrator) or higher, with 60% achieving the CMAA (Certified Master Athletic Administrator) designation. This credential requires a bachelor's degree or higher, completion of seven Leadership Training Institute (LTI) courses, and the completion of a graduate-level written project or oral presentation. The role of an AD encompasses a wide range of functions, including budgeting, eligibility, and facility management, in addition to managing coaches and student-athletes. Some AD positions also involve dual roles as teachers or administrators (e.g., assistant principals). Decision-making skills are central to the AD role, particularly in managing multiple stakeholders within the educational environment (Zdroik & Veliz, 2020).

Theme 3: ATs as SEW Resource.

When discussing the impact on coaches and student-athletes' health literacy (HL), more than half of the athletic directors (ADs) identified athletic trainers (ATs) as valuable resources for social-emotional wellness (SEW). AD2 highlighted how ATs contributed wellness resources to supplement information in the athletics handbook, while AD5 noted a collaboration with a local hospital/sports medicine facility that provided an AT who met monthly with the AD to discuss injury prevention and other relevant information for coaches to educate student-athletes. This aligns with Bjørnsen et al. (2019), emphasizing the importance of school health services in health education, promotion, and prevention of unique health issues for adolescents. AD6 confirmed ATs' pivotal role in providing SEW resources, often serving as the primary source of information, echoing Rodriguez et al. (2018) who found that adolescents view "health as a resource." The broad responsibilities of ATs showcase their capability to offer comprehensive SEW resources, including perception and social meaning, supported by Kutcher, Wei, and Coniglio (2016) who advocate for a multidimensional wellness approach. Engaging in student-led dialogue about SEW topics helps ATs and ADs conduct needs-based HL assessments, improving overall student-athlete well-being.

RQ2: What types of barriers exist regarding resources for high school ADs that could help student-athletes with help-seeking behaviors for improved SEW and SEW literacy?

Athletic Directors (ADs) face numerous challenges, including managing equipment, spectators, and facilities, alongside obstacles in health and wellness that are critical for student-athlete success. Two participants noted their roles were limited by administrative tasks and attending practices or games, while another two identified time constraints, with AD1 stating, "We don't have enough people in the schools." The need for more SEW training for coaches was highlighted through varied responses, with AD7 emphasizing the significant pressure on student-athletes, especially with the influence of social media. AD7 shared an incident where a student-athlete falsely posted about a college scholarship offer, leading to complications with a college coach. This scenario underscored the social fulfillment aspect of SEW, illustrating how student-athlete actions are influenced by the need for social validation and recognition.

Theme 1: ADs Limited Role and Duties in Education.

Schools differ greatly in many aspects, including the duties and roles of Athletic Directors (ADs). All ADs (100%) reported experiencing

limitations that hindered their ability to provide more wellness resources. Six out of seven ADs cited internal obstacles related to health and wellness resources. AD1 stated, "We don't have enough people in the schools," referring to the shortage of health professionals such as school counselors and psychologists needed to assist student-athletes with SEW issues. Similarly, AD7 noted from a regional newspaper that guidance counselors lacked sufficient time to address all students' needs. AD7 also pointed out that academics, though crucial for student-athletes, were outside the scope of AD duties, a sentiment echoed by AD4, who mentioned being limited to administrative tasks, practices, and games. Despite their resourcefulness, ADs' limited roles and duties restricted their overall impact within the school. Lee et al. (2020) emphasized that the emotional intelligence of ADs contributes to subjective well-being, suggesting that ADs have the potential to create conditions fostering growth and development. Ultimately, ADs, along with other administrators, are responsible for shaping the education-based athletics culture, thereby enhancing the social experience for student-athletes (Johnson & Benham, 2021).

Theme 2: Time as a Factor.

Time emerged as a significant theme in discussions about barriers to SEW resources, with five out of seven ADs specifically highlighting it as a hurdle or an ideal condition for implementing student-oriented wellness resources. ADs pointed out the need for more time during the school year for student-athletes to come together, with AD1 suggesting an additional two hours per day for ADs, and AD3 mentioning tight scheduling due to lack of facility space. The student-athletes' demand for performance-based training on travel or club teams outside school also highlighted the time constraint issue. AD4 noted that 75% to 80% of his coaches are teachers, allowing them more interaction with student-athletes throughout the school day. Hebard et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of transformational coaches in fostering open communication, which enhances help-seeking behavior to improve SEW and HL. Aguirre Velasco et al. (2020) stressed understanding and timely addressing help-seeking behaviors to prevent mental health problems. Despite operating in an education-based environment, ADs and coaches face challenges in dedicating time to address SEW issues outside regular school hours and sports schedules. AD5 encapsulated the sentiment by stating, "everybody is too busy now," underscoring time as a significant barrier.

Theme 3: Parents as a Challenge.

The third theme identified by ADs during the semi-structured interviews was the challenge parents pose to coaches, impacting the student-

athlete experience. Seventy-one percent of ADs mentioned parents in response to open-ended questions, and of those, 80% viewed parents as a challenge. AD4 and AD6 discussed “helicopter” parents who hover incessantly and have unrealistic expectations, often accompanied by anger. In contrast, AD7 noted that parents pressure interscholastic coaches for competitive scheduling and enhanced recruiting to secure college scholarships for their student-athletes. The sub-theme of ‘pushy parents’ as a risk factor aligns with MacIntyre et al. (2017), who found similar issues in a qualitative study with clinicians working with adolescent athletes. Zdroik and Veliz (2020) suggested that increased parental involvement through participative decision-making (PDM) leads to more frequent AD engagement with parents. AD1 highlighted that parents attending athletic events contribute to a toxic environment for officials, exacerbated by personal stressors such as family health issues or job loss. Overall, ADs view parents as a significant challenge in high school athletics, indicating that this SEW topic warrants further research to understand its implications for student-athlete well-being.

RQ3: How do high school ADs address SEW literacy in their training modules?

In discussions about SEW and training in athletic handbooks, participants shared that handbooks were policy-oriented, overly complex, and lacked wellness information. AD4 described them as “archaic” and focused on “consequences,” while AD3 noted they were mainly about “policies and procedures.” AD5 acknowledged that written policies are more established, but AD1 argued they should be “simplistic” as they are often “too comprehensive.” AD6 added that handbooks mainly include administrative protocols and certifications without wellness components. AD7 plans to create a new handbook next year with mental health and wellness sections. Regarding SEW training for coaches, ADs had mixed responses. AD5 mentioned state requirements for CPR/First Aid and NFHS online courses, while AD7 included a mental health component in preseason meetings. AD4 emphasized making student-athletes feel “safe, secure, and significant” but did not mention specific SEW training. AD6 suggested outsourcing professional development to community resources, like guest speakers or notable alumni.

Theme 1: Social Media Education.

The theme of social media education emerged consistently in responses to open-ended questions, highlighting its relevance to SEW and HL. Five out of seven ADs mentioned social media at least once. AD3 and AD7 emphasized the need for social media education to help student-athletes navigate platforms and for coaches to guide them effectively. AD3 identified

peer-to-peer comparison on social media as a challenge that could be transformed into an educational opportunity, while AD7 considered all stakeholders in the student-athlete’s life. AD7 remarked, “There is a lot of pressure on student-athletes that I don’t think a lot of people understand, especially in this age of social media.” AD7 shared a story about a student-athlete who posted on social media about receiving a Division I scholarship offer after a brief meeting with a college coach, despite no offer being made. The student-athlete explained the positive social engagement from peers as a reason for the post. The high school coach had to apologize to the college coach, fearing the incident could harm the program’s credibility. This story underscores the impact of social media on student-athletes’ lives and aligns with research on cultural sport psychology, which focuses on student-athletes’ unique identities (Schinke et al., 2018).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions and practices of interscholastic athletic directors (ADs) regarding social-emotional well-being (SEW) and their ability to identify SEW and health literacy (HL) barriers within the athletics department. Interscholastic ADs have distinctive roles, overseeing sport coaches and student-athlete wellness as part of the broader education-based athletics realm. High school sport coaches face pressure to succeed and help student-athletes who encounter numerous SEW challenges. ADs navigate the balance by providing resources and a supportive platform for both coaches and student-athletes. The study’s conceptual framework aligns ADs and sport coaches to integrate SEW practices into athletic program initiatives through educational resources and student-athlete feedback. Findings suggest that internal resources like school guidance counselors, school psychologists, and athletic trainers, along with external resources such as community organizations and local mental health professionals, enhance HL and social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies for student-athletes. Further analysis of the specific research questions connects these findings to the broader research literature.

RQ1: How does SEW literacy affect high school ADs in helping coaches to improve confidence in their abilities to deal with social-emotional challenges of student-athletes?

In this study, ADs highlighted their confidence in health literacy (HL) and leadership abilities in assisting coaches with student-athletes facing social-emotional wellness (SEW) issues. They noted impacts ranging from increased student-athlete involvement in extracurricular clubs

to teacher-coaches engaging in professional development related to SEW practices, which influenced student behavior. The role of the teacher-coach as a significant part of the social environment is reinforced by literature, emphasizing the importance of positive adult role models and support systems in reducing adolescent stress and negative mindsets (Wood & Brownhill, 2018). More experienced ADs demonstrated a better understanding of navigating challenges, consistent with literature on Emergency Action Plans (EAP) where ADs with over six years of experience performed better (Scarneo-Miller et al., 2020). ADs practicing servant leadership put others' interests first, focusing on student-athlete well-being (Lee, 2019; Lee et al., 2020). While resource access varies, ADs with high HL can bridge gaps with coaches and student-athletes by connecting sport and wellness for improved HL, aligning with literature on working with athletic trainers (ATs). ADs viewed ATs as SEW resource liaisons, supported by findings that ATs enhance overall health and wellness (Craddock, Pignataro & Daramola, 2016) and provide SEW training to ADs for dissemination to coaches, benefiting from decentralized structures like hospital partnerships (Pike Lacy, Eason, Stearns & Casa, 2021).

RQ2: What types of barriers exist regarding resources for high school ADs that could help student-athletes with help-seeking behaviors for improved SEW and SEW literacy?

Barriers have prevented ADs from providing student-athletes with resources for help-seeking behaviors to improve their health literacy (HL) and social-emotional wellness (SEW). ADs have job duties that do not necessarily overlap with academics, wellness, and social media, leading to overwhelmed school counselors who handle these areas. Despite these limitations, ADs continue to seek resources for student-athletes to improve their SEW and literacy skills. Coaches play a key role in shaping team culture regarding help-seeking behaviors, and ADs that model a culture for improved SEW can assist coaches in sharing resources with student-athletes. This aligns with the idea that coaching leadership is crucial in supporting a team culture that prioritizes help-seeking. ADs can 'coach the coaches' on social-emotional learning (SEL), support student-athlete mental health, and build life skills through characteristics like grit, leadership, and mindfulness, thus impacting whole school campuses and communities.

Leadership modules with team captains acting as liaisons have led to student-driven techniques to identify SEW issues among peers. Generation Z often seeks feedback through social media, highlighting the need for understanding their unique communication preferences. Schools serve as hubs for mental health and psychosocial

support, helping to break stigmas and reduce barriers to resources for students.

RQ3: How do high school ADs address SEW literacy in their training modules?

Ultimately, ADs proposed various ways to incorporate SEW literacy into their training modules. While many ADs from large public schools had internal professional development models, others sought external resources for sport coaches and student-athletes. One AD planned to add mental health and wellness information relating to SEW in the athletics handbook for the upcoming school year. However, all ADs noted that their athletics handbooks covered little to no information on SEW training, practices, or procedures. There was no mention of any formal SEW training structure for sports coaches across different states, outside of school or state requirements. Social media education emerged as a training theme, highlighting the need for ADs to be knowledgeable in diverse areas outside of sport. The literature emphasizes that the progression of interscholastic athletics demands athletic administrators to be adept in various disciplines, including social-emotional development, to help student-athletes build skills post-high school (Fowler et al., 2017; Hall, 2019). Social media, while outside the traditional athletics realm, is relevant for skill-building and managing SEW.

Conclusion

The study found that Athletic Directors (ADs), who are highly educated, credentialed, and experienced as former student-athletes, coaches, and/or teachers, play a pivotal role in supporting both coaches and student-athletes. ADs demonstrated resourcefulness by leveraging Athletic Trainers (ATs) as valuable resources for social-emotional wellness (SEW), involving them in decision-making processes to improve student-athlete well-being. Time management emerged as crucial for SEW education, with high school coaches struggling to balance time, knowledge, and resources for leadership development. The study highlighted the significant influence of parents and social media, identifying them as both challenges and opportunities for SEW initiatives. The diverse backgrounds of ADs contribute to their multifaceted approach to managing emotions and promoting well-being, emphasizing the importance of emotional intelligence and leadership skills. The involvement of ATs as SEW resources was notable, providing daily or semi-regular health support and comprehensive knowledge of physical and mental health practices. ADs who model a culture of SEW can positively impact coaches and create environments prioritizing student-athlete well-being. Future research should focus on

expanding the sample size and exploring specific areas of SEW in high school athletics, such as athlete identity and the Teacher-Coach role, to develop comprehensive programs supporting the holistic development of student-athletes.

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