

Among the 37 football programs in District 10, five have co-op agreements with other schools, and four teams are combinations with other programs because of school closures.

Is this the future of high school football? With shrinking roster sizes, the smaller schools could be forced into considering co-oping with other programs. Kennedy Catholic decided to play eight-man football in Ohio this season because of its shrinking roster.

The current co-ops in District 10 include Oil City with Cranberry, Franklin with Rocky Grove, Sharpsville with West Middlesex, Mercer with Commodore Perry and Mercyhurst Prep with Erie First Christian.

All five co-ops have had varying success over the years. Oil City, Sharpsville and Mercyhurst Prep have probably been the most successful of the five. Oil City has won District 10 championships with star players from Cranberry, while Sharpsville has maintained its impressive program with an influx of Big Reds.

Mercyhurst Prep has been the closest Erie County team to ending the Mercer County dominance in the District 10 playoffs with the help of Erie First athletes. One of the most prominent athletes to come through Erie First and play for the Lakers is Jesse Luketa, who currently plays for the Arizona Cardinals.

The co-ops have changed where teams fall in classification as well. Franklin has a PIAA enrollment of 244, which makes the Knights a Class 3A team. However, they have to include 54 of the 107 students at Rocky Grove, which bumps Franklin to 298 and into Class 4A.

Oil City, Franklin's biggest rival, has a PIAA enrollment of 241 to put the Oilers in 3A, but counting 83 of 166 Cranberry students puts Oil City in 4A. Mercer is at 148 students to put the Mustangs in 2A, and adding Commodore Perry does not bump the Mustangs up a class, and Mercyhurst Prep is in the same situation as their 146 enrollment puts them in 2A despite adding Erie First.

Sharpsville, however, would be in Class 1A this cycle if it wasn't for adding West Middlesex in a co-op. The Blue Devils are at 140 and the 1A range goes to 143. West Middlesex's enrollment bumps Sharpsville to 185 and into Class 2A. When the two rivals combined in the first place, the enrollment jumped to 3A and made Sharpsville ineligible for the playoffs for one year.

There are four programs in District 10 this year that are a result of schools closing. It started nearly two decades ago with the Conneaut School District closing Conneaut Lake, Conneaut Valley and Linesville to form Conneaut. The Eagles have seen different levels of success, including beating Cathedral Prep for the District 10 Class 3A championship in 2014. Erie School District was next in 2017 with the closing of Central Tech, East and Strong Vincent to form Erie High School. The Royals won a D-10 title in thrilling fashion their first year but have struggled to McDowell since that season.

There are two programs that have changed this season. The Warren School District voted to close Sheffield High School and Youngsville High School. Sheffield had a struggling program in District 9, while Youngsville lost its football program years ago but co-oped with Warren. The teams were shuffled, and Youngsville students are now at Eisenhower with Sheffield students attending Warren.

With small schools struggling to put together rosters with a safe amount of players, there could be more combinations and co-op programs in the future.