



# History and evidence show school sports help students win

Blaming school sports for academic inattention and bloated budgets is a popular move, but the evidence shows sports have positive effects for students.

**By Daniel H. Bowen and Collin Hitt**

Just over half of all high school students in the United States report being involved in school-sponsored sports (Koebler, 2011). It's a curious phenomenon unique to the U.S. public education system. At a basic level, sports and academics don't seem to belong together. Yet it's rare to find a public high school in the U.S. that doesn't have an interscholastic athletics program.

School-sponsored sports became a trademark of U.S. public education during the Progressive Era. A keystone moment for this development was in New York City in 1903 with the establishment of its Public Schools Athletic League. Before this development, youth athletic competition was predominantly student-governed; school-sponsored competitions typically were exclusive to boarding schools (Pruter, 2013). Forming a large, urban, public school sports league symbolized not only a significant development for organized youth athletics but also that sports had become a valuable component of K-12 education.

As compulsory school attendance took hold, public schools had to cater to a greater variety of educa-

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tional needs, and administrators increasingly felt compelled to create opportunities that were usually reserved for students from more privileged backgrounds (Pruter, 2013). The motivation for integrating sports into schools was primarily rooted in the philosophy of humanistic education that traces back to the Renaissance and was inspired by the ancient Greeks (Cubberley, 1920). An assertion from this more holistic view of education is that sports competition essentially can play a vital role in adolescent character development. However, there was also a much more pragmatic inspiration for this: Poor and working-class adolescents now had more after-school leisure time, and sports were perceived as a good way to keep adolescents occupied (Pruter, 2013).

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Youth sports did not disappear altogether, but the primary provider shifted from schools to recreational associations. Pop Warner Youth Football and Little League Baseball, for example, sprang up during this period to address the interest in youth sports. However, since these leagues were not fully, publicly subsidized, less-advantaged children disproportionately lost opportunities to participate (Pruter, 2013).

### Sports return

Yet high school sports came back stronger than ever after World War II. As a result of the post-World War II urban migration trends, rural colleges dropping many of their sports programs, and the decline of local, amateur sports teams, high school athletic programs became the pride of small towns across America. One of the most commonly cited and portrayed examples is Indiana high school basketball, which “helped local farm communities find redemption and uplift during a time when their way of life and economy were in decline” (Pruter, 2013, p. 317).

Student participation in school sports has surged over the past half century. The number of secondary student-athletes has nearly doubled since the 1970s (NFHS, 2015). The greatest contributor to this increase was Title IX, which required schools

to expand opportunities for female student-athletes. From 1972, the year Title IX was passed, to 1978, the number of high school girls playing school-sponsored sports increased nearly seven-fold to over 2 million from 300,000 (NFHS, 2015).

These historical developments collectively suggest that school-sponsored sports started and grew because Americans believed that:

- Adolescents have an inherent, organic passion for athletics;
- Sports increase student engagement in school communities; and
- Underserved populations would not have access to certain valuable extracurricular activities unless schools provided them.

Despite the perceived benefits and high levels of support from students and parents, interscholastic athletics constantly come under attack. In times of budgetary constraints, funds for extracurricular activities are typically the first on the chopping block, and sports tend to receive a disproportionate share of negative attention for proposed cuts. For instance, in fall 2015, in response to a projected budgetary shortfall, Virginia’s Fairfax County made national headlines when it proposed eliminating high school sports (Balingit, 2015).

While difficult decisions and cuts are an inevitable

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consequence of education budgetary constraints, arguments made against preserving school-sponsored sports typically rely on anecdotal evidence or stereotypes that are often intuitively appealing but rarely backed by sound empirical evidence. What does the evidence say about some of the most common arguments about school sports?

### #1. Sports participation has no role in academic development; in fact, sports might undermine academics.

Legendary sociologist James Coleman was one of the first sports critics to raise this concern in the 1960s after embedding himself in the suburban high schools of Chicago. Coleman lamented that academics played second fiddle to athletic achievements among adolescents, especially with boys (Coleman, 1961). The students he surveyed were far more likely to say they would rather be a “star athlete” than a “smart” student who gets “good grades.” Coleman

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concluded that schools had become “adolescent societies” and would remain so until academics could be made as popular as sports.

More recently, journalist Amanda Ripley (2013) has made a strident case against high school sports. As she points out, U.S. high schoolers test far lower in reading and math than students from Finland or Singapore, where participation in sports is not connected to school.

However, if athletics were harmful to academic pursuits, then athletes would perform worse than other students in school as well as later in life. But the most careful analyses to date suggest that student-athletes perform better than their peers. Specifically, researchers have found that student-athletes are significantly more likely to go to college (Shifrer et al., 2015), score higher on standardized achievement tests (Lipscomb, 2007), earn higher wages (Barron, Ewing, & Waddell, 2000), and are more likely to report having positive relationships with school personnel (Broh, 2002). Furthermore, the relationship between participation in athletics and school outcomes has remained fairly consistent over three decades as evinced in the findings from nationally representative datasets (Shifrer et al., 2015).

These studies have limitations. A significant challenge with rigorously assessing the effects of school sports is that it can be difficult to disentangle the extent to which participation produces academic benefits versus the possibility that student-athletes are just naturally higher-achieving students. If we were assessing the effect of a reading program on student outcomes, the best research design would be a randomized, controlled trial. However, randomly assigning students to participate in sports would be neither feasible nor ethical. So researchers must depend on natural experiments or real-world “shocks” that introduce lottery-like randomness into sports participation. The implementation of Title IX provided one such shock.

Title IX was passed in 1972 and required schools to give females the same opportunities to participate in school-sponsored sports that males had. However, because certain states had different student-athlete participation rates before implementation, the effect of the policy on female student-athletes varied substantially across state lines. Therefore, Title IX was a jolt to the provision of school-sponsored sports

opportunities, which could be exploited to examine whether changes in providing school-sponsored sports subsequently affected academically relevant student outcomes. A 10 percentage-point growth in female sports participation resulted in a one percentage-point increase in their college attendance rate, which also carried over into a significant increase in labor force participation (Stevenson, 2010).

Why do student-athletes appear to do better in school? One hypothesis is that sports instill values that are important for success in school. But even if this is the case, it does not necessarily mean schools need to offer sports. Students might just as easily benefit from club sports without schools footing the costs. Does something special occur when schools offer sports rather than when they are provided by nonschool organizations (such as clubs)? The evidence seems to suggest that it does.

## **#2. Adopting European-style sports club programs would enable adolescents to participate in sports while eliminating any negative influences that school-sponsored athletics have on academics.**

In Europe, organized youth sports take place completely outside of school. For instance, Ripley does not contend that sports are inherently bad for students. Rather, she makes the case that integrating them into schools is likely to compromise the school’s academic mission (Ripley, 2013). This argument has picked up steam as more youth have participated in nonschool club sports and organizations, such as the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) and soccer club teams (Cook, 2012).

There is appeal behind the argument that isolating sports from schools will improve the focus on academics. However, an alternative argument could be made for school sports. Coaches are in a unique position to hold student-athletes accountable for their academic progress in ways that club coaches cannot. For example, schools can leverage academic eligibility rules that require students to meet certain minimal academic requirements in order to be eligible to play interscholastic sports.

Once again, we examine empirical evidence to assess these claims. Throughout the 1970s, states started adopting and strengthening what are referred to as No Pass, No Play policies. These rules require students to maintain a certain grade point average or to pass a specified number of courses to be permitted to continue playing sports. However, no pass, no play rules differ from district to district and state to state. This means that athletes from different towns face different pressures to perform well in the classroom. The exact stringency of these requirements has provided variation in the expectations placed on student-athletes

across the country. The variations in no pass, no play rules approximates a natural experiment.

States that implemented tougher no pass, no play rules saw greater improvements in student-athlete academic results. According to one study, raising no pass, no play eligibility requirements led to significant increases in graduation rates, particularly with males (Vidal-Fernández, 2011). Through these academic eligibility requirements, educators have effectively leveraged opportunities to participate in sports to motivate students at risk of dropping out of high school to stay in school. These types of motivational tools are not available to athletic coaches outside of school settings.

### **#3. Eliminating school-sponsored sports will increase student participation in other extracurricular activities.**

Extracurricular activities across the board come under fire when districts consider budget cuts. Parents and teachers will argue that schools should oversee the provision of extracurricular activities but that there is a hierarchy of activities. When this happens, certain extracurricular activities are held up as superior to others because they are viewed as aligning better with the objectives of K-12 education. This view is reflected in John Gerdy's (2014) argument that K-12 schools replace sports with band:

The fact that a school's culture might shift toward being more academically focused without the distractions generated by a football program should be no surprise. A subtle but extremely insidious impact of football programs on the culture of an institution, one that is rarely acknowledged, relates to what can be described as an underlying culture of anti-intellectualism that often permeates a football program (p. 154).

In many instances, this type of argument is motivated by self-preservation. If cuts are inevitable, then an arts advocate has good reason to argue that his program is superior to other extracurricular activities. Yet we currently lack rigorous evidence to support or refute the claim that removing sports from schools would bolster support for other extracurricular activities that, in turn, would improve student outcomes.

The first major issue with this type of argument is that, as demonstrated earlier, it relies on "dumb jock" stereotypes that are not grounded in empirical evidence. Another problem is that it presumes the enthusiasm for sports results from supply rather than demand. School-sponsored sports are by far the most popular extracurricular activities because students are eager to play and parents are so supportive of these activities (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Education stakeholders might wish that chess club, debate team,

and band were as popular as sports, but participation in extracurricular activities is unlikely to remain at their current levels if school-sponsored sports were eliminated. Parents and students would likely be less engaged with their school communities, and many students would lose the opportunity to play sports altogether.

### **Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, the fervor for school-sponsored sports can get out of hand. For instance, the fanaticism that has been documented with traditions such as high school football in Texas can illustrate many of the undesirable aspects of an unhealthy affection for interscholastic athletics (Bissinger, 1990). However, as cooler, less-colorful examinations demonstrate, these depictions are more the exception than the norm. Anything can be overemphasized. Even reading and math achievement test scores can become an unhealthy obsession. Recent years have provided examples of drill-and-kill teaching, teachers gaming standardized test scores, and narrowing the curriculum (Nichols & Berliner, 2005). All good things should be pursued in moderation.

When considering whether schools should offer sports, remember that interscholastic athletics developed because schools wanted to provide a more holistic education and children lacked other places to play team sports. Schools saw sports as a useful way to keep students out of trouble, and eventually sports became a venue for communities to come together, promoting social capital (Bowen & Greene, 2012).

The debate over school sports is filled with passionate anecdotes, but we have consulted the research. We examined many of the more popular theories about the role of sports in education.

Student-athletes generally do better in school than

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other students — not worse. Opening high school sports to girls in the 1970s led to a significant and meaningful improvement in female college-going and workforce participation. Tougher academic eligibility requirements that schools place on athletes have decreased dropout rates among at-risk students.

Schools that cut sports will likely lose the benefits that school-sponsored sports bestow. Removing these activities from K-12 education would likely have negative effects on historically underserved school communities. As was the case with the Great

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Depression, less-privileged families would be less able to afford the expense of having their children participate in organized sports due to the cost of travel and registration fees of club organizations.

We do not contend that school-sponsored athletics are perfect and should be preserved exactly as they are, even in the face of financial constraints. In tough financial times, everything should be scrutinized. Sports are no exception. But when we look at the larger body of evidence, we find that sports are a tradition in U.S. education that has genuinely benefited students and their school communities. **K**

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"In terms you can understand, Kevin, you have to binge watch the road."