

THE ROLE OF ATHLETICS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN SUBURBAN AMERICA

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Abstract

The Role of Athletics in Public Schools in Suburban America

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Education in the United States is unique in that we associate athletic teams with our public schools. All across the country, countless student athletes use all their physical gifts to represent their high schools and communities. It is common for athletes to become popular amongst their peers because of their exploits on the field. Communities take a great deal of pride in the performance of these teams, which are funded by public tax dollars. Some people suggest that athletics directly associated with schools is a way to champion physical fitness. Others still would assert that the money would be better spent on more academic pursuits. Through the use of the qualitative method these questions were analyzed. Throughout the interviews that were conducted with faculty and students at North Snohomish County High School, a common theme arose. Sports were used as a social device to build community within the school. This community building is viewed as an extremely valuable experience to the students and therefore I believe has a role in the public school environment.

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Introduction

Every day after school, high school athletes head to the locker room to get ready for football practice. For many students, football and other sports have been an extremely positive experience in their lives. It has allowed them to get into better shape and become more adept at physical and athletic movement. They have formed life-long relationships with teammates and coaches, learned valuable lessons about hard work and being devoted to a cause bigger than themselves. The athletic field has educated many students in humility and respect. Yet, there are those who question the value that public school sports have in the world of education.

Teaching students life lessons in fitness is definitely an important step in quelling the nation's obesity epidemic. However, the question becomes, "is too much value placed on athletics?" Frank Deford, an acclaimed sports journalist for such publications as Sports Illustrated, would argue just that. According to Deford, the significance that is placed on obtaining an athletic scholarship is hurting students' (specifically boys) ability to get a well-rounded education. If this is indeed the case, our society is heading in a potentially dangerous direction, one in which being able to correctly name the three branches of government becomes secondary to being able to explain the ins and outs of the Cover 3 defense.

There are also people who would champion the role of athletics in education; saying that some lessons learned on the playing field can't be learned in the classroom. Physical toughness is not taught by sitting at a desk, but rather pushing your body farther

than you ever thought possible. There is some evidence that athletes are usually the best students within most schools.

With so many declarations from both sides, I have begun to wonder where the truth lies. The main question at the heart of this dilemma is this: “What is the role and value of high school sports?”

Literature Review

The literature that follows is broken down into three subsections; societal impact, academic impact and psychological impact. It demonstrates how interscholastic athletics have a deep and profound effect on many different areas of a student’s life. The societal impact section addresses how high school athletics is affecting our society now and in the future. The academic impact discusses the influence sports has on students academic lives. Finally, the psychological section demonstrates both the positive and negative psychological impact athletics can have on students.

Societal Impact

In his article for the Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, “Athletics and the Education of Boys,” Frank Deford discusses the effects of athlete centric society. The nature of Deford’s (2008) argument is that too much emphasis in society has been placed on sports. He cites a disturbing fact that came from the small college of Birmingham Southern, “...Birmingham Southern gave out 116 athletic scholarships, costing about \$4.5 million a year, and awarded exactly one full academic scholarship” (2008, p. 30). The board at Birmingham Southern decided this disproportion could not continue, and so Birmingham Southern dropped out of the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) top tier, Division 1, and became

Division 3. The major difference between the two is that in Division 3 awarding athletic scholarships is prohibited. Division 3 is the last bastion in collegiate sports where the term, “student athlete”, is absolutely true.

The small Alabama school was chastised by the media for making such a rash and unnecessary decision. However, people associated with the university responded in a much different way: “the alumni responded with greater giving, applications to the college improved in quality and, because the athletic department money did not go to scholarships, more Birmingham Southern students were able to participate on sports teams” (Deford, 2008, p. 30). This of course was merely a microcosm. Large numbers of colleges and universities are not about to drop their Division 1 status. However, it highlights a disturbing trend: There is a huge emphasis in youth sports on obtaining an athletic scholarship. Athletic scholarships are “strictly an American convention” (Deford, 2008, p. 30) No other country awards collegiate scholarships based on athletic achievement.

The system in and of itself can be considered the problem, as it “drives entirely too many parents to point their children toward an athletic scholarship, making sports more important than academics from an early age” (Deford, 2008, p. 31). In some ways, this has always, been the case with boys, but with the advent of Title IX, more and more girls are falling into the trap as well.

The trend continues even with people who don’t participate in sports collegiately as, “There are now more college students in the United States majoring in sports management than in engineering” (Deford, 2008, p. 31). This becomes dangerous in that it can potentially create a societal imbalance: One in which men, the majority of

athletic participants are far less educated than women. Already 60% of college students are female and that number is only growing. Deford argues that the best way to stop this imbalance from happening is to completely eliminate athletic scholarships altogether.

Whose Gym is it? Gendered Perspectives on Middle and Secondary Physical Education by Couturier, et al. gives a measured perspective on the differences between male and female athletic participants within the PE classroom. While not public sports per se, the study provides a valuable insight into the overall view of athletics between genders. Some would say that the findings are not surprising given the fact that, “adolescent girls are less active than males and that activity levels decrease with age” (Couturier, 2007). There are many factors ranging from the environmental to the psychological that are attributed to this decrease.

In terms of differences between male and female athletic participation it was found that environmental barriers were by far the overwhelming deterrent for females to not participate in physical education. Issues such as bringing a change of clothes, showering and going to their next class sweaty were far bigger issues to girls than they were to boys (Couturier, 2007).

Couturier suggests that, based on her results, educators need to make a more fully concerted effort to create activities that would invite far more female participation.

Barron, Ewing and Waddell (2000) examine athletic participation from a more economic standpoint. This study gives rise to a question that is rarely asked; does high school athletic participation affect future job prospects? While there is some correlation between former high school athletes and higher wages, it does not appear to be a direct

cause and effect; it does appear that athletes earn higher wages;

this does not imply, however, that the wage premium earned by athletes means that athletic participation directly enhances an individual's productivity. Instead, we find some evidence that athletic participation may act as one of several signals of individuals with greater ability or of individuals with a lower value of leisure (Barron, Ewing and Waddell, 2000, p. 420).

This is also backed up by Ewing in *High School Athletics and the wages of black males* (1995, p. 66). Which found that, "Former black male high school athletes earn a wage premium and fare better in the labor market than their nonathlete counterparts," (1995, p. 66) this suggests that while athletics may play a role in higher wages it is merely one of several contributing factors.

Academic Impact

In today's economic climate, extracurricular activities are being cut to save school districts money. Pressley (1996) argues this should not be the first response:

"The National Federation of State High School Associations (1991) reported that in the average U.S. high school today, 50 percent of the student body participates in at least one co-curricular activity and the cost for this participation is only 1-3 percent of the total school budget. Trimming the funding in this situation will not generate much in terms of money that could be re-allocated for more intellectually rigorous pursuits on a per school basis" (p. 74)

In Pressley's (1996) view, the money saved will not be worth what you are losing.

Pressley's research indicates that some of the best students at the high school level are athletes or involved in co-curricular activities. It boils down to a simple form of

motivation. If you want to keep playing you must keep your grades up. While a student may be focused on athletics there may also be increased interest in school, which includes academics, through athletic participation (1996, p. 74). This of course leads to an even more well-rounded student than one who focuses solely on academics.

It is also important to note that parents, teachers and coaches will all have a vested interest in a student's academic success when they participate in sports. The parents will enjoy seeing their child out on the playing field, coaches will benefit from their athletic performance and teachers will appreciate the diligence the athletes are showing in class. However, some would argue that these benefits are inflated, that "super athletes" will benefit from inflated grades while others will suffer from "dumb jock" syndrome and not be given credit for their work because of their athletic participation (Pressley, 1996, 74).

Pressley (1996) argues; "One of the most compelling arguments in favor of athletic expenditures is that sports keep youngsters from dropping out of school. A senior at Harrison High School, Colorado Springs, Colorado, said that he was suspended for fighting and kept from playing baseball; he felt like dropping out and only returned this year so that he could play. Teachers too said that they could think of several students over the years who stayed in class to play ball..." (p. 74). If athletics generate an interest in school then they are worth the money, but the evidence shows that athletes in general have better GPA's and are more involved in the school community.

In their article by Chomitz et al (2009), *Is There a Relationship Between Physical Fitness and Academic Achievement? Positive Results From Public School Children in the Northeastern United States*, they examine what the effects on academic progress are

when teamed with high physical fitness. The awareness of increased childhood obesity is the main impetus for the study.

There is a large amount of pressure on educational policy makers to increase this nation's academic achievement. It is important to understand that there is a positive relationship that is associated with being physically fit and increasing your grades. In fact, it may be the most beneficial indicator of positive results, as "Current research does not indicate that increased school time on PE and activity has a negative effect on academic performance; in fact, learning may be enhanced in physically active students" (Chomitz et al., 1996, p. 36). While the study is not an examination of high school sports and participation therein, it is a valuable resource in determining whether or not being an athlete has more than just a social benefit in the classroom but a physical one as well.

There have been many claims over the years about the benefits of athletics on students. What Bailey, et al. (2009) examine is what exactly are those benefits. There are significant claims being made by prestigious organizations in regards to athletics and education,

For example, the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education claims that PESS (Physical Education and School Sport) helps children to develop respect for the body – their own and others', contributes towards the integrated development of mind and body, develops an understanding of the role of aerobic and anaerobic physical activity in health, positively enhances self-confidence and self-esteem, and enhances social and cognitive development and academic achievement (ICSSPE 2001) (p. 2)

The benefits that are gained from physical activity are numerous. The question then becomes what exactly is the role of physical education in the world of education as a whole? According to Bailey, et al. (2009) there are four main areas where physical activity gives the most benefits. These four areas are physical, social, affective or psychological and cognitive (pgs. 6, 9, 11 and 14). The physical and social benefits have been widely accepted for years but the psychological and cognitive benefits are lesser known.

Bailey, et al. (2009) examines what aspects physical education should be held accountable for. This is a complex issue that has no easy answer. It could be argued that accountability in this realm is not even necessary. It does appear, however, that there is significant potential for progress if all aspects of accountability are explored in greater depth before making any sweeping changes (p. 19).

Psychological Impact

The study by Harrison and Gopalakrishnan (2003) examines what behaviors are exhibited when students participate in school sports when compared with students who do not. The survey, which was administered statewide, found that,

...Participants in any type of extracurricular activity were significantly more likely than nonparticipants to exercise and consume nutritious foods, to like school and do homework, and to express positive attitudes about self, peers, teachers, and parents (p. 118)

It was also found that participants were less likely to do drugs and other illicit activities. Not only are these students more likely to follow the straight and narrow they also appear to have a higher view of self-worth, "Those involved with team sports...were most likely

to believe their parents care a great deal about them, were most likely to report high self-esteem, and were least likely to report sadness, anxiety, and suicidal behavior” (Harrison and Gopalakrishnan, 2003, p. 118). While those are important findings, it should be noted there is potential that more well-adjusted adolescents are likely than others to turn out for sports.

There are disturbing trends in the study as well. Students from single-parent homes were much less likely to participate in any extra-curricular activities than those from two parent homes. In what Harrison and Gopalakrishnan (2003) cite as the most disturbing information they uncovered, participation in extra-curricular activities from victims of physical and sexual abuse from substances abusing families was extremely low (p. 119). This suggests that victims of abuse tend to create social isolation for themselves. The findings of Harrison and Gopalakrishnan suggest that there are myriad health benefits to be gained from participation in extracurricular activities.

Conversely, can a students’ outlook change based on whether or not they make the cheerleading squad? That question is at the heart of Barnett’s study on competitive extracurricular activities. It has been said that competition builds character and is good for the individual no matter what the outcome may be. That is not the case according to Barnett (2007), “For girls who are not successful in their bid to become members of these types of school-sponsored teams, their feelings about themselves and about school, and their classroom performance were negatively impacted” (p. 340). Not only were these negative feelings immediate upon the announcing of the outcome but also were lasting. Most of the girls felt negative impacts in regards to their schoolwork and self-esteem lasted for at least two months (Barnett, 2007, p. 339). Based on the practice of cutting

students from teams and other extracurricular activities, Barnett concludes that this common practice may do more harm than good for the participants who do not make the team.

Since Title IX was passed in 1972, there have been great inroads made in the equalization of sports for women. However, much of the discussion has focused on collegiate athletics. By and large, college athletes constitute a very small proportion of athletes within the United States. The group that has been best and most obviously served is that of high school girls, “Within a few short years of Title IX's passage, the school system went from 1 in 27 girls playing sports to 1 in 3” (Stevenson, 2007, p. 503). That jump in numbers is significant. Gains continue to be made today, in terms of increasing female participation. Title IX has provided an additional avenue for girls to connect with their schools and communities.

Athletic participation can even affect students' behavior in regards to dropping out. Is the student's integration within a school a significant factor on their likelihood to dropout? That is the question that McNeal (1995) examines at length in his study on *Extracurricular Activities and High School Dropouts*. According to McNeal (1995) there is a large amount of evidence that dropping out of high school not only has negative effects on your education but on your citizenship as a whole,

An increased probability of increased criminal behavior (Thornberry, Moore and Christenson, 1985), lower occupational and economic prospects (Rumberger, 1987; Steinberg, Blinde and Chan, 1984), lower lifetime earnings (Catterall, 1985; Rumberger, 1987; Steinberg et al, 1984), and an increased likelihood of becoming a member of the underclass (Ricketts and Sawhill, 1988) accompany dropping out

of high school in the United States. (p. 62)

Much of this information is not surprising. Could this be quelled if the high school dropouts had been participating in extracurricular activities? According to McNeal (1995), "Participating in the athletic arena significantly reduces the student's likelihood of dropping out, whereas participation in the academic and vocational spheres does not" (p. 74). This suggests that sports can play a huge role in determining whether or not a student views their academic career as worth it.

It is also important to consider the social impact on the decision to dropout, "students desire or need to be 'involved' may drive much of the effect; that is, the need to be a part of a group or community may lead to students to participate in activities *and* persist in school" (McNeal, 1995, p. 76). This can all be considered a significant feather in the cap for athletics in schools. McNeal shows that sports can be just as valuable, if not more so, for some students who find themselves on the academic fringe.

It is also suggested that school size may have an impact on whether or not students will participate in after school athletics. According to McNeal in *Participation in High Extracurricular Activities: Investigating School Effects*, "students that are attending schools that are larger or have problematic climates are generally less likely to participate in extracurricular activities."

Not only do other outside factors have significant impact on student psychology but the coach plays a vital role in determining team cohesion. According to Murray, "coaches who rated highest in training and instruction, and positive feedback had teams with higher task and social cohesion" (2006, p. 223). Suggesting that simple everyday interactions could have a meaningful impact on the student athlete.

Research Question

Education in the United States is unique in that we associate athletic teams with our public schools. All across the country, countless student athletes use all their physical gifts to represent their high schools and communities. It is common for athletes to become popular amongst their peers because of their exploits on the field. Communities take a great deal of pride in the performance of these teams, which are funded by public tax dollars. Some people suggest that athletics directly associated with schools is a way to champion physical fitness. Others still would assert that the money would be better spent on more academic pursuits.

In light of this literature review I am left with the following primary research question which directs this study: What is the role of athletics in public schools? A secondary question includes: Is there a benefit to sports being directly tied to the schools, or would we be better served by adopting a more European model of club teams with no school affiliation?

Methodology

Method/Rationale

In this project I will use the qualitative methodology. This method focuses on contextual understanding. In the context of my questions regarding the role of public school sports, this method allows me to not only examine data but also discuss the merits of athletics with teachers, coaches and administrators. A qualitative method will provide a more inclusive look at the data. It will provide the necessary context to look at all angles of the phenomenon and not just a single linear approach. To put it simply, it allows me to analyze the gray areas of the issue. The goal is for the qualitative method to

provide me with a broad view of how athletes and academics coincide. It will also allow me to focus on student athletes in action, whether I have them in class or coach them.

Sample

My data will be based on observations and interviews with parents, teachers, coaches, administrators and student athletes within the North Snohomish County School District. This will provide me with a broad spectrum of opinions and viewpoints within the district on the role that school sports play in public education. The interview subjects will be selected at random from two separate pools, one made up of people involved with high school athletics and the other made up of people not involved with athletics. This will allow for the most impartial results. Ten people, made up of both faculty and students, were interviewed.

Instrumentation

My role within the study will be to select the subjects and administer the interview questions. The data collection will happen while the interview is being conducted. The responses to the interview questions will comprise the heart of the study. Responses will be compared to each other to look for any similarities and differences in the answers between subjects. This will allow me to draw conclusions on the role of athletics from people who are in the field and working with student athletes and non-student athletes on a daily basis. The following interview questions will be asked:

1. Have you ever been to a high school sporting event? If so, what was the experience like?
2. Do you have athletes in your classes? If so, is there is difference between non-athletes and athletes?

3. Do you think athletics have a role in public school education?
4. Would we be better served to adopt a more European model of adolescent athletics (i.e., a town club team that is not affiliated with the school)?

Analysis/Validity

In analyzing my data, the interviews specifically, I want to focus on whether or not the subjects think school sports enhance or detract from the public school experience. I am interested if anyone thinks that we, as a society, would be better served by adopting the European model of youth sports. That model focuses on club teams that are not affiliated with schools in any way, shape or form. The subjects will all be asked the same questions and the answers will be compared to one another. This will grant me the ability to see how people's opinions differ on the subject. I also will be coaching track at the school throughout the research. This can be considered a significant bias toward the benefits of athletics.

Data

This is a compilation of the interview data that was collected. The first part of the data contains student interviews and the last half consists of text from interviewing faculty members.

Kyle Boise - Student

1. Have you ever been to a high school sporting event? If so, what was the experience like? "Yes, it was very loud and exciting. It was a fun night. The whole experience of it."
2. Do you have athletes in your classes? If so, is there is difference academically between non-athletes and athletes? " Yes, I have athletes in my classes. It depends

on the type of person taking their responsibilities over whether or not they will pass their classes or slack off.”

3. Do you think athletics have a role in public school education? If so, what is that role? “Yes, because it gives high schooler’s something to idol, I guess. And gives them something to be proud about their school. Our school is better than your school basically.”
4. Would society be better served to adopt a more European model of adolescent athletics (i.e., a town club team that is not affiliated with the school)? “I think that would be dumb. No one would want to join because there is no gratification for playing. You want to play for your school, not your town, I guess.”

Will Tucker - Student

1. Have you ever been to a high school sporting event? If so, what was the experience like? “Yes, I went to one of the football games this year. And it was a good experience. Lots of camaraderie with the other students.”
2. Do you have athletes in your classes? If so, is there is difference between non-athletes and athletes? “The only difference is when it’s during a season and they have to have their grades up for grade checks.”
3. Do you think athletics have a role in public school education? If so, what is that role? “They have a role in teaching kids leadership and how to work well with other people.”
4. Would society be better served to adopt a more European model of adolescent athletics (i.e., a town club team that is not affiliated with the school)? “No, that

would not be good. Half the fun of playing school sports is beating your cross town rival.”

Alana Lee - Student

1. Have you ever been to a high school sporting event? If so, what was the experience like? “Yes, I’ve been to a lot of football games. Those were awesome. I think baseball is boring but I have been to baseball games. Basketball is alright if it’s a white-out or black-out night.”
2. Do you have athletes in your classes? If so, is there is difference between non-athletes and athletes? “Yes, athletes are more aware of who they hang out with and who they associate with because of the athletic code. It doesn’t make a difference academically, they’re fairly smart people.”
3. Do you think athletics have a role in public school education? If so, what is that role? “I think their role is like...to make money for the school. It wouldn’t be really fun if school was just school.”
4. Would society be better served to adopt a more European model of adolescent athletics (i.e., a town club team that is not affiliated with the school)? “I mean...their lifestyle is a lot different. It seems like it works for them. As Americans we are very stubborn and don’t like change. Yeah, I guess you could say so, if we did it like the Europeans. It would separate school from sports and then you could live your life.”

Penny Cooper - Student

1. Have you ever been to a high school sporting event? If so, what was the experience like? "Yes, it was pretty awesome. All the football games where our guys kicked major ass."
2. Do you have athletes in your classes? If so, is there is difference between non-athletes and athletes? "I think they try harder with getting better grades and stuff. Otherwise they can't play."
3. Do you think athletics have a role in public school education? If so, what is that role? "Yes, I mean otherwise school would be super boring."
4. Would society be better served to adopt a more European model of adolescent athletics (i.e., a town club team that is not affiliated with the school)? "Maybe, because when it comes to athletics and academics some athletes do great academically and others don't care. Maybe it would force them to focus on academics."

Tre Smith - Student

1. Have you ever been to a high school sporting event? If so, what was the experience like? "I went to all the football games and it was terrible because I didn't get much playing time."
2. Do you have athletes in your classes? If so, is there is difference between non-athletes and athletes? "Yes, its crazy that people think that jocks are dumb because you have to at least a 2.0 to even touch the field."
3. Do you think athletics have a role in public school education? If so, what is that role? "I think they belong for sure. Someone who doesn't like school needs

something to motivate them. Without sports there would be a higher drop out rate.”

4. Would society be better served to adopt a more European model of adolescent athletics (i.e., a town club team that is not affiliated with the school)? “I think that will lead to a lot more bad grades because you can just play. I think its good to have school sports. It keeps people focused.”

Annie Brown - Student

1. Have you ever been to a high school sporting event? If so, what was the experience like? “Yes, I’ve gone to football games. They were exciting and fun.”
2. Do you have athletes in your classes? If so, is there is difference between non-athletes and athletes? “Yes, I don’t think there’s a huge difference. Some of them are more focused on their athletics but others are really good at balancing between the two.”
3. Do you think athletics have a role in public school education? If so, what is that role? “I think they belong in the school because its something everyone comes together for. And we all support them.”
4. Would society be better served to adopt a more European model of adolescent athletics (i.e., a town club team that is not affiliated with the school)? “That’d be stupid. I think its important to have it through the high school because of the coming together thing. The whole community comes together for the high school games and I think its more exciting.”

Robert Worthy - Teacher

1. Have you ever been to a high school sporting event? If so, what was the experience like? “Yes, it was a positive environment. I’ve gone to all the wrestling one’s. It’s obviously a different environment for wrestling (at NSCHS). The girls’ basketball game was awesome! The band was there, the drum line...”
2. Do you have athletes in your classes? If so, is there is difference between non-athletes and athletes? “Yes, it depends. There’s definitely a difference, I think.”
3. Do you think athletics have a role in public school education? If so, what is that role? “Yes, for some kids it’s what keeps them in school. It keeps them motivated. It’s also an opportunity for kids who will never play a sport beyond high school the chance to play a sport. I think most people who participate in sports have a better chance of success later in life. If you have two average kids. One in sports, one who’s not. I think the one in sports will have greater success.”
4. Would society be better served to adopt a more European model of adolescent athletics (i.e., a town club team that is not affiliated with the school)? “No, I think you need sports in schools. I think for some kids it’s what draws them to school. It’s school spirit. I think you need the cross-town rival. I think we’re competitive by nature, there’s something about being proud for your school. I think that would destroy high school.”

Kathy Scott-Juarez – Teacher/Librarian

1. Have you ever been to a high school sporting event? If so, what was the experience like? “Yes, I’ve been to track meets and football games. Track I really enjoyed that because there’s a lot going on. It’s not as intense and I liked that. I

didn't really like football games. I don't like the rah-rah stuff. I don't like how intense it is. All that group think scares me. I think people lose sight of the fact its kids on the field and it's just a game."

2. Do you have athletes in your classes? If so, is there is difference between non-athletes and athletes? "Yes, in general there is a difference. The kids who are athletes seem more concerned with their grades as it pertains to eligibility. Football, basketball and soccer kids are really intense about their grades. Doesn't translate to good work. In some ways it can be a negative reinforcement because they aren't as focused when sports aren't in season. It's incumbent on us to make school interesting whether there are sports or not. Pressure from parents and administrators to pass kids so they can play. I don't think that's in the best interest of the kid."
3. Do you think athletics have a role in public school education? If so, what is that role? "No. I think that schools especially in this era of cuts. We need to focus school on academics and academic programs. I value sports and I value what is learned in sports. I think that can be met in a more academic structure. I think a sports culture takes away from the development of other interests and passions that kids have. 11% of the district budget goes to sports. I don't think the money spent on sports should be, it should be spent on academics. The money distribution is not equitable. It's a lot of money spent on too few kids, compared to the bulk of the school."
4. Would society be better served to adopt a more European model of adolescent athletics (i.e., a town club team that is not affiliated with the school)?

“Absolutely. I think that’s empirical. European kids academic experience is academic. They study things our kids wouldn’t get until college. Maybe not even the second or third year of college.” – Spends summers in Italy

Rachel Washington - Teacher

1. Have you ever been to a high school sporting event? If so, what was the experience like? “Yes, I supervise home football games. I attend every football game. The experience is fantastic. The kids are in to the game. The fans are amazing. The support is amazing. Very rarely do I feel like I have to focus on discipline than the game itself.”
2. Do you have athletes in your classes? If so, is there is difference between non-athletes and athletes? “Yes, I can’t pigeonhole them all together. I would have to say no. Just like with student athletes, the same can be said with non-student athletes. You have those who take pride in their work and those who just want to make sure they’re passing. That can be said for both student athletes and non-student athletes.”
3. Do you think athletics have a role in public school education? “Yes, I would say that student athletics help teach kids fundamental behaviors. Public education isn’t just about what they learn out of the textbook, but it’s about them becoming the best person possible. They’re going to learn stuff on the field and in the gym that they’re not going to get in the classroom.”
4. Would we be better served to adopt a more European model of adolescent athletics (i.e., a town club team that is not affiliated with the school)? “Having no experience with that I have no educated authority. My best educated guess is no,

because some students come to school knowing that to play the sport they have to come to school.”

Howard Wightman – Teacher/Coach

1. Have you ever been to a high school sporting event? If so, what was the experience like? “Yes, I’ve been to probably hundreds. Some are really exciting and really electric and some are cold, wet, sparsely attended and desultory.”
2. Do you have athletes in your classes? If so, is there is difference between non-athletes and athletes? “Yes, I think at the high end, no. I think at the low end, athletes are forced to care more about their grades because of eligibility standards.”
3. Do you think athletics have a role in public school education? If so, what is that role? “Yes, it makes school more fun and keeps kids engaged in the school and the school community. It’s education in itself. It’s a different type, because they volunteer for it and are being helped along by a coach who is not their greater. In the classroom the teacher is the obstacle to achievement. Coaching is a hell of a lot more fun because of that.”
4. Would society be better served to adopt a more European model of adolescent athletics (i.e., a town club team that is not affiliated with the school)? “A few years ago I would have said definitely no; that the public school athletic system was better. But now that so many districts have made kids pay to play and coaches are out of the building. I feel like schools are just sponsoring a team, rather than running a co-curricular educational opportunity.”

Analysis

The interview process demonstrated the prevailing sentiments regarding after school sports at North Snohomish County HS. All of the interview subjects had attended at least one sporting event over the course of their careers. The teachers had been to far more events than the students. This was initially surprising but it makes sense based on the nature of the profession. The students were all generally enthusiastic about sporting events, but there was a mixed view on whether or not their academic experience would be better served if the European model was adopted.

Student Views

The students at the school were in favor of the sports culture that had been created. All of them had attended high school sporting events, some more than others, but they all agreed that they enjoyed themselves while they were there. The most interesting thing about the student's experiences at the games was that, to them, the game was not the most important part. Will Tucker, a 12th grader talked about his time at one of the football games, "It was a good experience. Lots of camaraderie with the other students". This is a recurring theme in the student interviews. The games themselves are rarely mentioned, but the times spent with the other students in the stands are of the utmost import. Had the football team been mediocre to average this thought process could have been expected, however, the team finished 12-1 and went to the state semifinals.

To the students at NSCHS athletic events are viewed more as a social event. To the majority of the student body the final score is of very little consequence. Spending time with their peers in a setting outside of school is the main goal.

The students interviewed never made the claim that athletes were given preferential treatment in the classroom. There was a general feeling that student athletes were motivated in the classroom if for no other reason than to stay eligible for sports. Annie Brown had made this observation, “Some of them are more focused on their athletics but others are really good at balancing between the two”. This balance speaks to the benefits of athletics in schools. By participating in extracurricular activities, students are forced to learn time management skills and prioritize their lives. This is teaching them a valuable skill for later in life.

At NSCHS, students are required to maintain at least a 2.0 grade point average to be eligible. If they do not meet these requirements they must miss athletic contests and do grade checks until the standard is met. The athletic department maintains the list of names for who is eligible and who is not. Tre Smith speaks about the minimum GPA, “Its crazy that people think that jocks are dumb because you have to at least a 2.0 to even touch the field”. Tre is referencing a traditional stereotype that athletes are stupid and do not do well in school. Tre was a good athlete and an exceptional student who will be joining the Air Force. He definitely took issue with the dumb jock stereotype because it did not reflect him at all.

All of the students believed that athletics in public schools had a definite and valuable role. To them it was about building community. “It gives (high school students) something to be proud about their school,” said Will Tucker. Annie Brown echoed the support for athletics building community by saying, “I think they belong in school because it’s something everyone comes together for. And we support (the athletes)”. The idea of a school without sports was also considered boring by more than one of the

students interviewed. For the students at NSCHS, community was important to them. They viewed athletics as the best way to establish common ground for the vast student body. With over 1,700 students it is difficult to find something everyone can agree on, but beating your rival is one of them. This was a vital social necessity to the students of NSCHS.

Since community building through sports was so vital to the students, they were against adopting the European model of athletics. There were two students who believed that adopting the European model could potentially be beneficial but their answers were hardly fervent. Penny Cooper surmised that the model did have potential, “Maybe, because when it comes to athletics and academics some athletes do great academically and others don’t care. Maybe it would force them to focus on academics”. Another student, Alana Lee, pointed out how different European and American culture is, “I mean...their lifestyle is a lot different. It seems like it works for them. As Americans we are very stubborn and don’t like change.” Culture is so different in both places that this model would be very difficult to implement in the United States.

Annie Brown again cited community as the biggest reason for not adopting that model, “I think it’s important to have it through the high school because of the coming together thing. The whole community comes together for the high school games and I think its more exciting.”

Throughout the history of our country, sports have played a vital role in shaping the American Identity. This is displayed by the answers of these high school students. A significant part of being brought up in American is being influenced by athletics. To them

interscholastic athletics is part of their academic identity. It is part of what makes school, school.

Faculty Views

The views of the NSCHS faculty were mixed when it came to the role of sports in school. Most of them were in favor of the skills that sports could teach students but not all of them were happy with how things were implemented.

All of the faculty interviewed had been to at least one athletic event. Rachel Washington supervises all of the home football games, “The experience is fantastic. The kids are in to the game. The fans are amazing. The support is amazing. Very rarely do I feel like I have to focus on discipline than the game itself.” This again speaks to overall community building. However, some of the faculty view this as a dangerous proposition. Kathy Scott-Juarez is the librarian and she is worried about the overall environment at athletic events, especially football games, “All that group think scares me. I think people lose sight of the fact it’s kids on the field and it’s just a game”. To Scott-Juarez the building of community is towing a fine line between a mob mentality.

All of the faculty members have had athletes in their classes. The overwhelming thought about whether there was difference academically was that it was a case by case issue. Howard Wightman, a teacher and coach had this to say, “I think at the high end, no (it doesn’t make a difference). I think at the low end, athletes are forced to care more about their grades because of eligibility standards”. The implication being that good students will always be good students whether or not they are athletes.

In terms of athletics role in public education, some of the interviewees were incredibly supportive while others believed the resources could be better spent elsewhere,

“I think that schools especially in this era of cuts. We need to focus school on academics and academic programs. I value sports and I value what is learned in sports. I think that can be met in a more academic structure. I think a sports culture takes away from the development of other interests and passions that kids have. 11% of the district budget goes to sports. The money distribution is not equitable. It’s a lot of money spent on too few kids, compared to the bulk of the school,” said Scott-Juarez. To her the skills learned on the athletic field can be achieved in the classroom but others, like Rachel Washington, don’t agree, “I would say that student athletics help teach kids fundamental behaviors. Public education isn’t just about what they learn out of the textbook, but it’s about them becoming the best person possible. They’re going to learn stuff on the field and in the gym that they’re not going to get in the classroom.” Teamwork and sportsmanship are not skills that are well represented in a traditional classroom setting. Sports allow students to learn these vital skills through tangible experience.

Howard Wightman offers the view that students gain valuable things from sports because the role of the coach is different than the role of the teacher, “It’s education in itself. It’s a different type, because they volunteer for it and are being helped along by a coach who is not their greater. In the classroom the teacher is the obstacle to achievement. Coaching is a hell of a lot more fun because of that”. In athletics, both the athlete and coach are attempting to achieve the same thing. They both want to win. In a classroom the teacher may want everyone to work hard enough to earn an A, where the student may just be happy with a C. It is easy for the student to view the teacher as the obstacle to this goal.

When it comes to adopting the European model of athletics, only Scott-Juarez was in favor of it. However, she spends her summers in Italy and has seen the model in action firsthand, “European kids academic experience is academic. They study things our kids wouldn’t get until college. Maybe not even until the second or third year of college.” It should also be noted that most European public education systems are vastly different from ours, where students are separated into college prep schools or trade schools. The American model places all students in an equal setting. Teacher Robert Worthy believes taking athletics out of schools is counter-productive, “I think you need sports in schools. I think for some kids it’s what draws them to school. It’s school spirit. I think you need the cross-town rival. I think we’re competitive by nature, there’s something about being proud for your school. I think that would destroy high school.” By eliminating the athletics you create a dramatic change in the high school experience. To Worthy, that change would eliminate a significant role that high schools play in students’ lives.

Howard Wightman was torn on the issue, “A few years ago I would have said definitely no; that the public school athletic system was better. But now that so many districts have made kids pay to play and coaches are out of the building. I feel like schools are just sponsoring a team, rather than running a co-curricular educational opportunity”. High school athletics are becoming harder to participate in. Pay to play policies make it difficult for low-income students to take part in all of the sports they would otherwise. At NSCHS the \$80 athletic fee has also had a profound impact on girls athletic participation. Wightman, who is the head track and field coach, noticed an immediate impact, “Girls are less likely than boys to spend \$80 to try a new sport. It’s

definitely hurt our numbers on the girls side.” This new policy may have a profound impact on high school athletics for years to come.

Implications

Based on the evidence presented above it is clear that at NSCHS, sports are viewed by the students and staff as an opportunity for community building. This presents a challenge because it creates value that is not inherently academic. This raises numerous questions about whether or not public schools should be concerned with something that staff and students view as valuable but does not increase academic aptitude. Could these community building values be achieved through a European model? The students in this study said no, but that cannot be trusted without fully exploring the issue.

Conclusion

Athletics have many impacts on education, as is evidenced above. Athletes still go to practice after school every day, with little to no idea what impact playing a sport is having on them or their peers. The impacts are significant, from improving self-esteem to making it more likely for a student on the fringe to stay in school. But the biggest impact appears to be in the creation of a school community. To the students that community holds an extremely high value and the faculty views it as important as well. It is important for the students of a large high school to have the ability to reach common ground on something. If athletics is the way that is achieved, then I believe their role in public education is a necessary and valuable one.

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