

# Education-based Sports and Activities: It's Not Just for Entertainment

By Juli Doshan on February 08, 2016

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Whenever schools have to make budget cuts, athletics and activities often are some of the first programs to be eliminated. However, high school athletics provide a host of benefits to students: they raise grades, increase attendance and graduation rates, and teach lifelong skills, especially when education remains the driving force behind it all.

These facts and more were discussed at a workshop entitled "Education-based Sports and Activities: It's Not Just for Entertainment," conducted last July at the NFHS Summer Meeting in New Orleans in which the audience was encouraged to "keep the main thing, the main thing."

"If our programs are not measuring up and helping education be priority number one, then I think we're wrong to continue to offer things that cause kids to be distracted or pulled away from their academic responsibilities," said Gary Musselman, executive director of the Kansas State High School Activities Association (KSHSAA). "So when I say 'keep the main thing, the main thing,' I'm trying to say let's keep education as our top priority."

Musselman began the presentation with an explanation of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to help explain various psychological needs that high school students have. Of those, the most important are the needs to belong to a group and to garner esteem.

"I really believe that high school activity programs fulfill that need for lots of kids," Musselman said. "One of the great compliments we hear in athletics nowadays is somebody's a good teammate. What that tells me is that person's loyal, dedicated and they care about other people on the team.

"That's the kind of teammate most of us want to be with and it's the kind of employee somebody would like to hire. Whether it's academic measures of success or success after high school, where

97 to 99 percent of young people are never going to play organized sports again, what are the life lessons taken from these experiences?”

To that end, Musselman also cited a survey of 86 members of the legislative assembly in Alberta, Canada and more than 100 senior corporate executives to determine if athletic participation in high school had an effect on their success. The most valued skills reported included teamwork, discipline, goal-setting, leadership and self-confidence. Other benefits the survey respondents mentioned were physical and mental health, stress relief, making friends and acceptance.

“One of the more fundamental things was just that it was fun,” Musselman said. “They enjoyed doing it. And, of course, that translates into benefits for the school where you have a better school climate.” A better school climate was one of the main findings of a 2014 study of more than 1,000 high school athletes, parents and principals by Varsity Spirit (UCA/UDA). The group reported better academic achievement, greater civic engagement and a stronger feeling of connection to their school.

“As corny as it sounds, it’s still a very important part in lots of schools,” Musselman said. “I like to represent my school, my community. I’m honored to wear the uniform and know that I earned it; nobody gave it to me. There’s the real powerful life lesson – that’s the stuff that changes lives.

“For every one kid out of 10,000 that gets a scholarship, great for them. But for the other 9,999 kids, this is the stuff that puts them on a pathway to a more successful life.”

During the 2008-09 school year, the KSHSAA worked with the University of Kansas on a study of 139,349 of the state’s high school students, which looked at the GPAs, graduation rates and dropout data of athletes and non-athletes. What it found was that athletes’ GPAs and graduation rates were higher and that 94 percent of the 2,016 students who had dropped out of school were not involved in a sport.

“I think what that tells us is that kids like to be a part of something that is bigger than themselves,” Musselman said. “They like to be part of groups. I think there’s a natural, innate instinct in all of us as humans that we want to be social.

“The adolescent years can be very challenging years for young people. I think kids are always looking for a place to be accepted and a place to belong, and that’s going to happen in either a

positive way or a way that might not be so positive. I'm worried about the 94 percent of the kids that would drop out of school. Where are they going to go and what are they going to do?"

Musselman urged the audience to not only ask themselves what they do as administrators, but to remember to ask themselves why they do it every once in a while.

"I think it's really important for us to take a look at what we are doing and why we are doing it because other people are asking that question and they control the purse strings," Musselman said. "School boards are under pressure with budget cuts, state governments are under pressure because revenues are low and expenses are high, so something's got to give."

Kevin Charles, executive director of the Delaware Interscholastic Athletic Association (DIAA), also spoke at the Summer Meeting workshop and noted that sometimes outdated DIAA regulations prevent students from participating in activity programs. He said his state's regulations are a product of the 20th century when students attended school where they lived and had limited choices to move, but there is now a change in the delivery of education and the way youth sports are consumed.

"I am forced to address 21st century issues armed with a 20th century tool," Charles said. "In the 1970s, when our core regulations were developed, our membership was 75 percent traditional public schools and 25 percent other, mostly faith-based and private schools. Today, traditional public schools comprise about 44 percent of our membership.

"Additionally, the Delaware Department of Education has a major goal to increase graduation rates. For many of our at-risk students, athletics is a strong incentive to attend school. If the child is in school, educators have a chance to get them to graduation; thus, the importance of evaluating regulations to remove barriers to participation without compromising our core values."

In order to comprehensively review the DIAA regulations, Charles said he has contracted a former Deputy Secretary from the Delaware Department of Education to help provide a fresh perspective and divide the task into manageable portions.

That mission includes validating current regulations with an emphasis on addressing major issues and improved usability, and aligning with the Department of Education's goal of increased graduation rates. They wanted the regulations to be easily understood while representing the will of

the membership, considering the impact on the student-athlete and considering the impact of enforcement on the DIAA and its member schools.

Charles encouraged the audience to consider four core questions including why the regulation was there, if it was still relevant, if it needed updating and if they could live without it.

“He who regulates least, regulates best,” Charles said. “Whenever we are considering an eligibility issue, we should always attempt to find ways to make the student eligible so long as that ruling does not compromise our core values.”

Both presenters stressed that student participation should be the key reason behind everything they and their fellow administrators do.

“I think we need to continue,” Musselman said. “We need to make an effort to reach as many kids as we can as long as we can, and coaches and schools need to look at every possible way they can keep as many kids involved as possible.

“The benefits are obvious and they’re proven through the research.”

