

Are High School Sports Good For Kids? By Daniel Gould,
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High school sports are an integral part of the fabric of American society with over 5 million youth participating in any school year. Here in Michigan almost 300,000 young people take part in high school sports every year. Moreover, school sports are justified because of their potential educational benefits. For example, the mission statement of the National Federation of State High School Activity Associations indicates that it promotes “participation and sportsmanship” in an effort to “develop good citizens through interscholastic activities which provide equitable opportunities, positive recognition and learning experiences to students while maximizing the achievement of educational goals.”

Not only are school sports justified on educational grounds, but researchers have shown that participation in them and other extracurricular activities have positive effects on adolescents. For example, a multiyear study conducted in Michigan has shown that children who participate in sports have increased educational aspirations, closer ties to school and increased occupational aspirations in youth. It has been demonstrated, then, that school sports participation has a number of desirable benefits.

This does not mean, however, that school sports are not without problems. An overemphasis on winning, year-round single sport participation, and difficulties finding qualified coaches are but a few of concerns facing leaders in the area. The over-emphasis on winning issue is especially significant as when this occurs the educational objectives for involvement are often forgotten.

And while principals, athletic directors, and coaches have the ultimate responsibility for keeping winning in the proper perspective and must be held accountable for their actions, let's not place all the blame on them. The general public, parents and society is placing more emphasis on winning than ever before

which, at times, pressures athletic personnel to deviate from the athlete-centered educational and personal development mission. We cannot let this happen. The educational objectives of high school sports must be recognized and placed in the forefront.

This does not imply that winning is unimportant and should not be emphasized at all. Leading youth development experts contend that one of the potential benefits of sports participation is the development of initiative or the ability to set and go after goals, which is part of the competitive process. Moreover, in a recent Institute for the Study of Youth Sports investigation of outstanding high school coaches who were recognized for the character and citizenship building contributions to players we found that these individuals were highly successful (winning over 70% of their games). They stressed winning, but never put winning before the personal and educational development of their players. Instead, they maintained a strong educational philosophy and did not just talk about building character in their players, but took daily actions to do so while at the same time pursuing excellence.

The bottom line is that high school sports are still a highly desirable activity for students to participate in and should be supported for their educational benefits. However, we as taxpayers and proponents of positive youth development must insist that their educational objectives always come first. We cannot knowingly or unknowingly let winning become the only goal and must support school district, athletic director and coach efforts to always put the education and development of the student-athlete first.

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