

The Effect of the Overemphasis of  
Extracurricular Activities on the Classroom Environment

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### Abstract

Extracurricular activities and athletic programs are important features of American high schools. Little research has been done on how much instructional time is negatively affected or lost due to these activities. The emphasis on extracurricular activities increases the sense of school community in a diverse school, but it also takes away from the already small amount of time teachers have to present new material to their students. Educators and administrators alike need to look carefully at the impact that participation in extracurricular activities has on their classroom and school environments.

## The Effect of the Overemphasis of Extracurricular Activities on the Classroom Environment

Extracurricular activities and athletic programs have long been a significant part of school culture in American schools. The importance of sports in school is indisputable, but the effect of the emphasis of athletics on American schools is open for debate. On one hand, sports bring diverse students together and create a unified school culture; students wear the colors of their school's sports teams and the school gathers to cheer on its athletes. On the other hand, athletics take students out of class and disrupt the classroom environment; students must miss class to attend their athletic events and teachers schedule tests and projects around "the big game".

At Washington High School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, athletics play an enormous role in shaping the school culture and environment. Washington is a large, rather diverse school with over 25 different sports teams. Football is the program with the greatest impact on the school as a whole, which is the case for most American high schools. The most notable effect the football season has on the school and classroom environments occurs during Homecoming Week: the pep assemblies, voting for homecoming court, and impromptu pep-band concerts all disrupt the normal schedule. Not only is the actual instructional time limited during this week, but the students are also incredibly distracted when they are in class. Carol White, the German teacher at Washington, once said that the students are simply not going to pay attention in class the day before the homecoming game no matter what the teacher may do.

Despite infringing on instructional time, homecoming is a time when the diverse school population comes together to cheer on their team and show their school spirit and pride. Having pride in one's school and one's community is incredibly important, especially in areas with

diverse populations. Students often segregate themselves into cliques depending on their ethnic, religious, socio-economic, and even academic backgrounds. “The big game” can bring the students from all of these groups together under one common goal and for one common purpose. The sea of red, white, and blue at the Washington Homecoming Game was a clear indicator that, at least for that one night, the diverse students of the school had something in common with each other.

Many schools are currently facing budget cuts, and athletic programs are suffering; many students do not understand how their school will even be able to survive without these programs. Athletic events are a significant part of the culture and environment in American schools, but this is not the case in many other countries around the world. American students see athletes as “role models” in the schools: the people that other, less athletically inclined students should strive to be, but is this really a healthy perception of high school athletics? What influence does this emphasis on sports and the culture of athletics have on the classroom environment? Does the sense of school spirit and community outweigh the loss of instructional time? Should athletics continue to play such a large role in American schools?

### Literature Review

Extracurricular activities are a prominent aspect of the American High School experience. The professional and scholarly literature contains information on various aspects of the impact these activities have on students and the classroom.

Of particular importance to researchers is the relationship between academic performance and extracurricular activities. Teachers and administrators alike attempt to identify the variables that will increase student achievement and success, and much of the research on extracurricular activities and athletic programs deals with their positive relationship with academic performance

and achievement. According to Roy Mendez (1984) in his article “Extracurricular Activities in Today’s School – Have We Gone Too Far?,” “the single most common characteristic among successful people is that they were involved in student activities at school” (p. 60). This sentiment is echoed by the National Federation of State High School Associations in Stephen Lipscomb’s (2007) study “Secondary School Extracurricular Involvement and Academic Achievement; A Fixed Effects Approach”; “involvement [in extracurricular clubs and sports] is viewed as an indicator of teamwork ability, self-confidence, and the ability to succeed in competitive situations” (p. 463). Lipscomb’s research supports these assertions. He used “a fixed effect strategy to test whether activity participation provides an immediate return to student learning” (p. 463). He looked at student participation in extracurricular activities in relation to math and science test scores and in relation to their expectations of attaining a Bachelor’s degree. Lipscomb concludes that student participation in extracurricular activities correlates with a “1.5 to 2 percent improvement in test scores and a 5 percent improvement in Bachelor’s degree attainment expectations” (p. 472). While it is clear that participation in extracurricular activities positively correlates to higher levels of student achievement, researchers have not looked at the other factors that may be skewing these results. Does participation in extracurricular activities really lead to higher achievement, or are higher achieving students simply more likely to participate in extracurricular activities?

Researchers and scholars are also interested in the role extracurricular activities play in shaping the social lives of students. Most teachers and administrators maintain that the purpose of school is, first and foremost, to provide students with an education. Students, however, often disagree with this view of school. According to Bishop, Bishop, Gelwasser, Green, and Zuckerman in their 2003 study “Nerds and Freaks: A theory of Student Culture and Norms,”

students report that “learning [is] only one of their reasons for coming to school. Socializing, sports, and extracurricular activities [are] at least as important for many students” (p. 160).

Students see their schools as a place where they are allowed to spend time with their friends, and they use this time to develop relationships and connections with their peers. Participants in extracurricular activities, especially athletics, often develop friendships with other team members and create groups or cliques with one another; “joining a team and showing up regularly at practice may gain one admission to the crowd associated with that team” (Bishop et al., 2003, p. 149). However, students who are not particularly talented at the sport they choose to play may be accepted on the surface, but become the object of jokes or the lowest person in the hierarchical structure of the group. One area lacking concrete research is the effect of participation in extracurricular activities on students’ social skills and networking abilities. Being part of a team creates a built-in set of social contacts for students, but there is not a great deal of social skill required to make contacts with people with whom one is forced to communicate on the playing field. However, developing these communication skills may make it easier for students to communicate and network with other people. Is there a correlation between participation in extracurricular activities and students’ social and communicative abilities? Does participation in these activities help to prepare students to work in collaborative settings in the future? The research also fails to address if and how athletics can bring students in a diverse school together under a banner of school spirit and pride.

Another aspect of athletic activities that is of particular importance in American society at this time is fitness. Story and Neumark-Sztainer (1999) conclude that “physical activity promotes optimal growth and development in children and adolescents. It prevents short-term health problems, and over the lifespan, it may prevent long-term chronic diseases such as

diabetes, cancers, and cardiovascular disease” (as cited in Pabayoy, et al., 2006, p. 690). Physical activity has very important impacts on the lives of young people, and schools have numerous opportunities to “provide many opportunities to promote activity beyond the physical education class” (Pabayoy, et al., 2006, p. 691). These opportunities include intramural activities, special sporting events during assemblies or spirit days, and, most notably, extracurricular athletic programs. The research examines how a drop in the number of opportunities to participate in physical activities at school affects the total level of physical activity of students. The study concludes that students at schools with more resources and more opportunities for activity are more physically active. On the other hand, “a reduction in access to school sports could interrupt the maintenance of regular physical activity levels in adolescents, making them even more vulnerable to adopting a physically inactive lifestyle with the resultant effect on health” (Pabayoy, et al., 2006, p. 698). This study only examines the activity levels of students at schools which have reduced their number of athletic activities. The research fails to address the activity levels of students in schools that have never offered school-based sports programs. Does a lack of athletic programs negatively affect the activity level of students, or will students who do have never had access to sports programs at school find other ways to be active?

Much of the literature on extracurricular activities focuses on the viewpoint of administrators and the school board. The main focus of this literature often deals with the budgetary concerns of the school as they relate to extracurricular and sports programs. Uniforms and equipment, personnel, travel, and upkeep of sports facilities all add to the already tight budgets of schools offering athletic programs. As Mendez (1984) reports, “\$350 is a conservative average expenditure for suiting up a player in a football uniform, and \$200 for a basketball uniform” (p. 61). These numbers are over 20 years old, and the costs are constantly

increasing, so the cost to field players today is even higher than reported by Mendez. The literature fails to discuss where this money comes from and how it could be used in the schools if it were not used by athletic programs.

Administrators also point out the loss of instructional time due to extracurricular activities. As Charles Railsback notes in his 1985 article “Learn to Arrest the Crime of Wasted Class Time”, “[schools] exist to educate students – not to serve as entertainment centers... or any of the other nonschool roles society often imposes on them” (p. 32). Students should be focusing on learning when they are at school. However, according to the article “Who’s Calling the Plays?” by Jay Goldman (1990), “the balance measuring academics versus athletics tilts immeasurably to the side of athletics” (p. 10). If students are spending too much time thinking about extracurricular activities or athletic programs, schools may need to find a way to reduce the amount of emphasis placed on athletic activities and increase the amount of emphasis placed on academics. One way to de-emphasize athletics and emphasize academics is to schedule extracurricular activities after the school day (Mendez, 1984). However, these events cannot be scheduled too late in the day. If students are involved in activities that take all of their time after school and keep them out late, their performance in classes the next day will be negatively impacted. As Mendez (1984) asks, “When does keeping a student out until 11 p.m. for basketball become justifiable when it is at the expense of the next day’s academic performance?” (p. 62). The literature acknowledges that extracurricular and athletic programs cause a lack of instructional time. However, the research fails to address how much instructional time is negatively affected or lost due to these activities.

### Research Findings

I was not involved in athletic activities in high school, so I do not have personal experience with the effects of being part of a high school athletic team. I was, however, involved with other extracurricular activities, such as debate and student congress, which caused me to miss a significant amount of class. I was a very hard-working student, and I did not enjoy missing class for these activities. My personal experience and the importance that I place on school and academics skew my analysis of this issue toward academics and away from extracurricular activities and athletics.

Washington High School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa places a great emphasis on athletic activities. During my time as a student teacher the most important of these activities was football. Every time there was a football game the drum-line would march through the hallways of the school during the last part of first period. Not only did this severely disrupt the last five to ten minutes of first period, but the students also had a difficult time settling down at the beginning of the next period. Furthermore, most students were very excited about the games, which made it difficult for them to pay attention to the material presented during class. This was seen primarily during the last period of the day, which was even more disrupted because the students who were involved with activities often had to miss this period to make it to their away games on time. However, the disruptions of game days also had positive effects on the school and classroom culture. Most of the students became visibly excited about the upcoming game when the drum-line came through the halls. Their sense of school spirit and the amount of pride they demonstrated for their athletic teams came to the forefront. Students danced in the hallway

and followed the drum-line. The school seemed to be more of a community, if only for that one day.

Another very large disruption to instruction time was the all-sports assembly that occurred in late September. During this assembly, the members of all of the fall sports teams were called out onto the floor of the gymnasium to be recognized. This was followed by a number of skits and games facilitated by the faculty. The assembly lasted for over an hour, which meant that all periods had to be shortened. Some classes were only shortened by a few minutes, but the morning periods were less than half their normal length. This type of disruption is a substantial inconvenience to teachers. Either the teachers have to schedule a work-day or a movie and not spend any time learning new material, or the classes in the afternoon fall behind the morning classes and the teacher has to find a way to catch up. The students also take advantage of days when they have shortened classes. They realize that they only have 20 minutes of class and spend as much time as possible making sure that they do not have to do any work during that period of time. Despite the loss of instructional time, the athletic assembly did have positive effects on school culture and student attitude. The students enjoyed the assembly. The teachers got involved by participating in games and skits, which was an opportunity for the students to see their teachers in a more informal setting outside of the classroom. The fact that students and teachers had the chance to interact with one another outside the classroom in a way that was meant to simply be fun and not stressful helped to create a relaxed atmosphere in the school.

With the exception of the aforementioned homecoming week, the biggest disruption to the classroom schedule during my time at Washington High School occurred when the football team made it to the state playoffs. The students were excited on the day before a playoff game.

They did not want to pay attention during class because they were looking forward to the chance to cheer on their team that night. The day after a game the students were either still excited about their win the night before or extremely disappointed in their loss. Both of these situations disrupted instructional time because the students spent most of their time talking about the outcome of the game, and it was difficult to get their attention turned toward learning new material. Furthermore, one of the playoff games did not even begin until almost 9 p.m. on a Monday and the game was played at a site almost an hour away from Washington High School. These factors resulted in many students not making it home from the game until 1 a.m., which had drastic consequences on the classroom environment the next day. First, a number of students simply did not come to school or came to school late the day after the game because they had not gotten enough sleep the night before. Second, many of the students who did come to school were tired and fell asleep during class. Finally, those students who did come to school and did not fall asleep were upset that they had lost the game the night before and did not want to concentrate on academics. Consequently, an entire day of instructional time was lost, not to mention the time that was wasted the day before by students looking forward to the game. However, these playoff games brought the school together more than most of the other games. The number of students wearing school colors on the day of a playoff game was staggering, and the halls echoed with administrators, teachers, and students alike all saying “it’s a great day to be a Warrior.”

It is clear that extracurricular activities and athletic programs have both positive and negative effects on the classroom environment. Much research has been done on how these activities positively affect student achievement, but little has been done to investigate how much instructional time is lost due to these activities. I have come to the conclusion that many educators firmly believe in the importance of extracurricular activities, and they do not want to

research the negative effects in fear of what they may find. The fact that extracurricular activities take away from instructional time is a red flag that should inform administrators and teachers alike that it is time to rethink the emphasis that is placed on athletics in American high schools. The fact that extracurricular activities are important to students is undeniable, but schools need to make the academic well-being of the students the priority. All other aspects, however important they may be, should be the secondary focus. Additional research needs to be done on the impacts, both positive and negative, of participation in extracurricular activities so that schools can make more informed decisions on the amount of emphasis they want to place on these programs.

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