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## A review of selected aspects of the secondary school student activities program

### Abstract

Since the 1970s many school districts have experienced increased financial problems and declining student achievement levels. These problems have provided critics with new opportunities to voice their position and suggest changes in educational programs. As a result, every program in the educational system is being scrutinized. Critics typically agree on the importance of the core curriculum in meeting educational goals, but question the need for non-core programs. Some researchers conclude that such programs as physical education, driver education, and student activities are actually a hindrance to education (Pines, 1982; Sizer, 1984).

A REVIEW OF SELECTED ASPECTS OF THE SECONDARY SCHOOL  
STUDENT ACTIVITIES PROGRAM

A Research Paper  
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Tom Kotz  
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Since the 1970's many school districts have experienced increased financial problems and declining student achievement levels. These problems have provided critics with new opportunities to voice their position and suggest changes in educational programs. As a result, every program in the educational system is being scrutinized. Critics typically agree on the importance of the core curriculum in meeting educational goals, but question the need for non-core programs. Some researchers conclude that such programs as physical education, driver education, and student activities are actually a hindrance to education (Pines, 1982; Sizer, 1984).

This investigation identifies, through a review of the literature, the role played by activity programs in student development at the secondary level, the potential benefits derived from such programs, and the nature of activity program criticisms found in the literature. This study should concern the decision-makers in secondary school programs, because without these understandings, they could leave student activity programs vulnerable to educational "hatchetmen."

#### The Role of Student Activity Programs

The role of student activity programs is to meet those needs and interests of students which cannot be met by the core curriculum. Student activity programs help individual students develop special skills and interests beyond the

regular classroom, an environment which allows practical application of some of the knowledge gained in the core curriculum. When viewed this way, student activity programs are adjunct to the core curriculum (Cuccia, 1981; Miller, 1983; Cohen, 1981). Student activity programs are also the major means of meeting the leisure, recreational, social, and emotional needs and interests of all students (NCA, 1978; Miller, 1983). The theory is that when they fulfill their needs and interests through activity programs, students will develop a "positive attitude" toward themselves, toward avocational and recreational activities, and toward the schools (Weber & McBee, 1983).

The importance of meeting student leisure, recreational, social, and emotional needs and interests is established by Loesch (1981) and McDaniels (1982). Their research concludes that adolescents need opportunities which allow them to complete psychologically stimulating activities appropriate for pre-adult developmental life tasks and to crystalize their self identities. Without these opportunities, many adolescents suffer from boredom, which sometimes leads to delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, inappropriate sexuality, or ineffective interpersonal interactions with peers or family members. Boredom can also produce psychological and physical lethargy. Gholson (1979) sees the educational system as the

natural environment for providing opportunities or experiences to fulfill these needs and interests. He points out that during the adolescent stage of development, formal education receives disproportional emphasis due to parental and social pressure. But formal education cannot meet all the needed experiences for cognitive development and decision-making. Adolescent needs are too important to be left to "trial and error." Student activity programs can provide leisure activity opportunities due to their more informal nature.

The role of student activity programs in the secondary school has been debated by educators. One debate centers on the status which should be afforded activity programs in the educational system. A second centers on whether activity programs should be placed outside the school setting. Some researchers conclude that student activity programs are achieving their goals and purposes (Cuccia, 1981; Abney & Greene, 1981). In fact, Cohen (1981) contends that student activity programs are more efficient at achieving educational goals than formal curricula. He therefore believes student activity programs should be treated as more than an adjunct to the core curricula. The National Federation of State High School Associations agrees, terming activity programs "every bit as important to the students' development as the classroom experience" (Durbin, 1983, p. 5). (Hayden (1983), however,

contends that "cocurricular" is a more realistic billing because that term more accurately describes the link between activity programs and formal schooling in the United States.) These arguments lead advocates to suggest essentially that student activity programs should be given equal or near-equal status with the core curriculum (Cohen, 1981; Hayden, 1983; Frederick, 1959).

Most critics do not argue with the role of student activity programs in the lives of adolescents. Instead, many argue that activity programs should be placed outside the school setting (Maeroff, 1982; Brown, 1985; Pines, 1982; Sizer, 1984). This would reduce the number of roles that schools would have to concern themselves with, improve the focus on core curriculum objectives, and reduce budgets.

#### Benefits of the Student Activity Program

Potential benefits which can be derived from student activity programs focus on the individual participant. However, residual benefits are possible for the school and community, particularly where athletic activities are concerned.

Activity program participants find an enjoyment and interest not found in the classroom, but which could transfer to the classroom (Cohen, 1981; Durbin, 1983; IHSAA, 1985; Leonard, 1984; Hall, Powers, & Hardy, 1984). Participants learn the value of teamwork as well as the responsibility and



organization of time (Yaffee, 1982). Many educators feel that students often derive subtle benefits that have lasting effects. They learn the value of (1) doing their best, (2) working to gain respect, and (3) cooperating with different races to achieve similar goals (Yaffee, 1982). Student activity programs are viewed as an equalizer of educational opportunities for disadvantaged students. Activity programs provide such students with an avenue for learning which keeps them from giving up and dropping out (Yaffee, 1982; Mudra, 1982; Leonard, 1984).

Durbin (1983) finds that through competitive involvement students not only learn the value of teamwork but gain a sense of self-worth, through increased self-respect, -esteem, and -confidence. Valuable skills of cooperation, participation, and sportsmanship can be utilized beyond graduation. Students gain the ability to establish, and work toward the completion of, goals through self-discipline and sacrifice (Hayden, 1983).

In an IHSAA survey (1985), students cited the benefits of participation as: (1) increasing educational opportunities, (2) meeting the needs of today's youth, (3) bringing communities together, and (4) improving attitudes. In addition, the overall results of this survey imply that participation promotes better attendance, higher grade point

averages, increased success in later life, fewer discipline problems, and fewer dropouts. Tutko (1985), Brown (1985), and Hayden (1983) suggest that the eventual impact of these benefits is improved behavior when activity participants reach adulthood.

The benefits for the school are also positive, though less conclusive. Cohen (1981) concludes that "school tone" is directly related to the student activity program participation ratio. In addition, student activity programs provide a unique comraderie among students and faculty. Athletics provide a setting for informal social interaction and prestige, which aid the general conduct of the school (Coakley, 1982). Coakley concludes that athletics make a favorable impact on a school through improved school spirit and cooperation. Leonard, too, (1984) contends that student activity programs evoke school support from teachers and administrators.

The greatest benefits for the community seem to be related to interscholastic athletics or, more precisely, athletic success. The original philosophy behind placing interscholastic athletics in the educational system was to meet the demands of the communities (Montgomery, 1960). The Iowa High School Athletic Association (1985) concludes that participation in sports brings communities together.

Competitive events are social occasions which give the community a unifying purpose (Leonard, 1984; Yaffee, 1982).

However, not everyone agrees with these judgments. Critics claim that educators incorrectly assume that people understand the value of athletics for the community and will support them financially. Parents usually recognize the values for their children and do support activities, but non-parents are often less interested and less supportive (Aschenbrenner, 1976; Yaffee, 1982). Wilkinson (1981) claims that community and parental support is dependent upon athletic success. He points out that when athletic teams are not successful, community support dwindles. Very little research is available on the positive impact of student activities, other than sports, on the community. Research is needed to determine the level of community awareness of, and interest in, such activities as speech, drama, and band.

#### Criticisms of the Student Activity Program

The criticisms of student activity programs center around three problems: (1) inadequate funding, (2) overemphasis on sports, and (3) inconsistency of administration and philosophy.

According to Cohen (1981) and Coakley (1982) inadequate funding is a key problem. Their research indicates that student activity programs are very popular, and that there is

a demand for them. However, educational systems often lack sufficient funds to meet the demand. The result is a lack of sufficient teachers, space, and resources. This shortage has a direct impact on those students who are eliminated from participation because of these shortages. Some researchers indicate that many people believe that student activity programs can stand alone and should receive minimal, if any, tax support (Brown, 1985; Coakley, 1982). Certainly, some communities are unwilling to vote for increased tax levies to aid activity programs (Aschenbrenner, 1976). Such people apparently feel they are misspending money for what is essentially pre-professional athletic training for a small number of students (Yaffee, 1982). Thus, educators are forced to seek additional financial support by charging admission fees to interscholastic athletic games and through booster club fundraising activities (Leonard, 1984). In addition, some students are charged an activity fee to participate, which defrays part of the expense, but also eliminates many economically disadvantaged students (Yaffee, 1982).

Overemphasis of interscholastic athletics is a frequent criticism which has several dimensions: (1) exploitation of students, (2) disruption and interference with the rest of the school program, (3) diversion of funds from academics, (4) perpetuation of sexual inequities in athletics, (5) declining

participation levels as students avoid the increased pressure of interscholastic competition and opt to spectate instead, (6) domination by so-called major sports, which obscures other activities in student programs (Yaffee, 1982; Leonard, 1984; Kleinkienst & Weston, 1978; Brown, 1985; Wilkinson, 1981; Sabo & Runfola, 1980; Sizer, 1984; Montgomery, 1960).

Further criticisms deal with inconsistencies in administration and philosophy as they relate to educational goals. Several researchers find that student activity programs are used as a lever to gain good classroom behavior and as an incentive to improve grades. This practice is seen as an admission of failure on the part of the educational system to meet the needs of the students in the classroom (Frith & Clark, 1984; Mudra, 1982; Durbin, 1983; Weber & McBee, 1981). Cohen (1981) believes denial of access to student activity programs on the basis of behavior and grades is a form of "double jeopardy." Such practices are not educationally sound.

Some research indicates that student participation rules are often capricious and contradictory to sound educational principles. In such instances, though student activity programs have advantages, schools prevent those advantages from happening by restricting student participation for reasons unrelated to the activities themselves. Weber and

McBee (1981) find that the more prestigious the activity, the more limitations are placed on participation. Such limitations are damaging to student activity programs, as they bring charges of "elitism" (Cohen, 1981). Courts will not allow schools to offer student activity programs as a privilege extended to selected students (Clear, 1982).

Weber and McBee (1981) find that there is an unequal distribution of power between student activity programs and the formal curriculum. Coaches and advisors have much more to say in who shall be removed from activities than do faculty members in their classrooms. The research did not produce a definitive explanation for this imbalance. Critics claim the explanation lies in an overemphasis on winning in athletic programs (Hayden, 1983).

Some researchers disagree with the contention that setting rigid participation rules is capricious or inconsistent with sound educational philosophy. They argue that student activity programs are not as important to education as the core curriculum and should be used to set priorities for students (Frith & Clark, 1984). Courts recognize that activity programs are an integral part of the students' educational experience but feel they are less significant than academic study (Clear, 1982).

Warford (1981) and Brown (1985) claim that certain activities in student programs no longer meet student and community needs and should be removed from the educational system. They believe that such programs could be better served by the private sector and would eliminate administrative and financial headaches for schools.

#### Summary

The role of student activity programs is to provide educational opportunities which meet the needs and interests of every participant. The educational aim is to make students productive citizens by giving them experiences which expand formal education. In addition, student activity programs should teach students how to use their leisure time effectively and provide educationally sound experiences deemed necessary for the passage from adolescence to adulthood.

The potential benefits which can be derived from student activity programs are numerous for the individual participant and may extend to schools and communities as well. Research indicates that student activity programs generally provide opportunities for participants to develop physically, socially, psychologically, and emotionally, all of which leads to positive adult behavior. Participants and parents realize there are potential benefits from activity programs for student development. Some researchers conclude that the

benefits gained by participants in student activity programs transfer to other areas; other researchers are not convinced of this.

Benefits for the school and community are based primarily on the prestige of interscholastic competition. School spirit and community pride and support for the school are some of the potential benefits of competitive success. However, more research is needed to determine to what extent this is true.

Criticisms of student activity programs center around financial problems, overemphasis of athletics, and inconsistency in administration and philosophy. Researchers conclude that the high demand for student activities causes a financial crunch which eliminates students from participation. Other researchers argue that students are eliminated from participation by rules which are not consistent with the educational philosophy of student activity programs or the total school program. Overemphasis of athletics causes numerous complaints which range from less student participation to interference with academics. One area that must be examined more closely is the contention that, although research shows that involvement in student activity programs does not hinder academics, it has yet to prove that it contributes to academic success.



The net effect of these criticisms causes some people to question whether student activity programs are worth the financial and administrative headaches. Potential benefits which are not realized by the majority of the students raised questions of program effectiveness. Decision-makers will need to be aware of these arguments when the inevitable examination of the student activity program begins in their school district.

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