

Should Schools Eliminate Sports Teams?

Sports are a huge part of the American high school experience. Last year, almost 8 million high school students participated in organized sports programs. But increasingly tight school budgets, the nationwide push to raise academic standards, and safety concerns—especially about football—have prompted some schools to ask whether sports programs should be cut back or eliminated.

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YES In the world's smartest countries, school is about learning. Kids play sports outside of school, at recreation centers, on club teams, or in pick-up games on dirt fields with no adults in sight.

When kids from these countries come to the U.S. to live or study abroad, they're surprised by the "Olympic Villages" they encounter in our high schools. School in the U.S. is of course about learning, but it's also about pep rallies, booster clubs, trophy cases, and cheerleaders decorating football players' lockers after they fill them with brownies.

Those messages shape kids' priorities. When I surveyed former exchange students about their impressions of America, 9 out of 10 said that American teenagers cared more about sports than their peers back home did. "Doing well at sports was in the U.S. just as important as having good grades," observed one German student. One exchange student from Finland noted, "In my home country, school is just for learning."

To some visitors, American high schools look like Olympic Villages.

This mash-up makes school more fun. The problem is the dishonesty. By mixing sports and academics, we tempt kids into believing that it's OK if they don't like math or writing—that there is another path to glory. It's not lost on kids that their local newspapers devote an entire section to high school sports and say nothing about the trials and travails of the 10th grade English class. This hypocrisy eats away at the focus and integrity of our schools.

Imagine if medical schools dedicated hours each day (and a chunk of their budgets and staff) to the culinary arts—to perfecting tiered wedding cakes and fancy breads. We could argue that this approach makes med school more fun and keeps students from dropping out, but that would be insane.

If we want to build real school spirit and teach kids about grit, hold a pep rally for the debate team. Those kids are training to rule the real world. •

—AMANDA RIPLEY

Author, *The Smartest Kids in the World*