

The Classroom With a Scoreboard: The Important Role of Athletics in Education

by Michael Nitti, Superintendent

As the 2016-17 school year begins and high school student-athletes return to their respective pursuits, they will be supported by millions of dollars that are allocated in school district spending plans to pay for scholastic sports. In these budgets a significant amount of taxpayer funds are slated to cover the cost of coaching salaries, official fees, facility rentals, equipment, transportation and other items to provide students with the opportunity to participate in athletics while representing their public schools.

In this time of escalating property taxes, rising costs and painful post-recession financial realities, the reflective individual could not be blamed for asking if the considerable public cost of scholastic sports programs is worth it. This is a particularly valid point now since there are so many opportunities for kids to take part in sports that do not require the sanctioning of their school or the support of taxpayers.

At one point, there was the argument of the benefits of educational opportunism for student-athletes-that high school sports provided kids the chance to be recognized and perhaps earn an athletic scholarship to college. But in this era of specialization and high profile youth sports, the reality is that the elite high school athlete can earn a scholarship without ever putting on their high school's uniform.

So with all these dynamics being considered, does it make sense for schools to still be in the sports business during an educational funding crisis?

To answer that question, it should be acknowledged that the phrase 'extracurricular' is one that has always been misleading and should be discarded. If we are going to spend this much money on athletic programs, they need to be viewed as co-curricular; as a vital, integral and uniquely important part of the comprehensive educational experience.

Princeton University promotes the concept of 'Education Through Athletics' and, if that credo is important enough to be adopted by our Ivy League higher education brethren, it certainly should be embraced by public high school institutions everywhere. The true value and purpose of our sports programs, and why we do it and the public pays for it, is for students in public education to gain the educational benefits that are provided by scholastic athletics.

When we look at the attributes that make an individual successful in life; the real, meaningful traits that truly translate to achievement and cannot be measured by standardized tests, we begin to see the true educational value of our athletic programs. Perseverance, a strong work ethic, dedication, resiliency, dealing with adversity, attributes truly needed for achievement and valued by employers, are all characteristics honed and developed by participation in sports.

It is not only these intrinsic values that are built by our high school sports programs, but key components of intelligence and analytical thinking that are enhanced by participating in athletics. In fact, when you see a high school game or event for any sport, you are viewing

perhaps the most authentic form of assessment that exists in education. The student-athletes are being asked to strategize, think critically, act selflessly, and work towards a common goal as part of a team. Like any valuable form of instruction, the activity involves the construction of knowledge and has value and meaning far beyond the classroom, which in this case is the athletic arena.

There has always been an interesting hypocrisy with regard to athletics in the scholastic realm, where it receives heightened importance in terms of media coverage and public interest, but its educational benefits are diminished in comparison to the considerable intellectual rewards of art and music. While not diminishing the higher order thinking skills honed by the arts, who is to say that the analytical and reasoning abilities promoted by athletic participation are not at the very least, to use a sports metaphor, in the same ballpark?

Furthermore, if a goal of education is to provide students with meaningful and rewarding experiences, giving them memories and life lessons that they will carry with them forever, then scholastic athletics will continue to fulfill a vital role. To paraphrase an old saying: no one lies on their deathbed thinking about taking the PARCC exam. Sports provide young people a rich tapestry of success and failure, joy and anguish, and perhaps the most unique and important aspect of athletic participation-the opportunity to do something great.

Granted, high school sports are not recreational activities and coaches and administrators are expected to put forth competitive programs, but schools are not professional franchises. They are institutions of learning and the ultimate evaluation of any scholastic athletic program, and the justification for spending community funds, should be the educational value of the program for each participant. Did the entire endeavor, from the first day of practice to the final whistle of the last game, help us produce a better student, citizen and person?