

In this issue...

Researchers have discovered a correlation between school connectedness and success in later life, including higher GPA, increased likelihood of receiving a college degree, and lower rates of drug and alcohol abuse. This review of the research by Tracy Walker, activity advisor in Novato, CA, examines the value of a student leadership program. Look for more on the benefits to leadership students in the December issue of *The Advocate*.

The Value of Student Leadership Programs

Leadership programs are often undervalued and therefore, under-funded by administration. However, these programs are imperative for positive adolescent development and student success.

Since the Columbine tragedy (Bonny, Britto, Klosterman, Hornung, and Slap, 2000) people in the United States have become more aware of adolescents' needs for positive development and social interaction. Many studies have been done based on the idea of school disconnectedness in correlation with antisocial behavior. School disconnectedness has been linked with higher at-risk behavior. The research concluded that school connectedness was more protective than any other factor including family connectedness (Bonny et al., 2000). Concurrently, the Journal of School Health reported that students with higher levels of school connectedness report higher levels of emotional well-being. Participation in extracurricular activities has been shown to reduce anti-social behavior over a period of time (Mahoney, 2000).

A 14-year study followed 1,259 students at various times in their adolescence and young adulthood. Eccles, Barber, Stone, and Hunt (2000) found participation in structured extracurricular activities linked to both short and long term positive adolescent development. Conversely, their studies also showed that students less involved are more likely to participate in risky activities, i.e., using drugs, drinking alcohol, skipping school, and getting pregnant. Involvement at school predicted greater enjoyment of school, a higher GPA, greater likelihood of attending a full time college, and graduating from college.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1995) found that organized and structured activity programs can discourage risky behavior, i.e., dropping out of school, becoming a smoker, getting arrested, etc. However, for a program to be successful and dissuade at-risk behavior, a program must offer activities that satisfy its participants in a variety

of ways, and not just occupy a student's free time. The researchers discovered other participants' views and attitudes can positively or negatively affect other group members. For example, students may feel pressured to participate in an at-risk behavior if they are in the minority of the group and the behavior is considered socially acceptable within the group. Fortunately, the converse is also true. Students can have a positive effect on their peers and influence them in positive ways as well.

Reinforcing Lessons Learned

Participation in extracurricular activities benefits both students and teachers in the classroom by giving access to skills difficult to learn in a classroom setting. Kanaby (1996) stated the following (as cited by Klesse, 2004, 27):

Activity programs are the perfect complement to the classroom—not because students learn how to become more proficient in sports or debate or music, but because they learn how to become productive citizens in these hands-on laboratories. It is through cocurricular activity programs that students learn respect for others, specifically teamwork, loyalty, compassion, tolerance, courtesy, fairness, integrity, and humility, as well as respect for self through self-esteem, discipline, courage, responsibility, honesty, ethics, poise, and pride.

The National Center for Education Statistics (1995) reported that extracurricular activities “provide a channel for reinforcing the lessons learned in the classroom, applying academic skills in a real-world context, and thus must be considered part of a well rounded education.” They also considered school disconnectedness to be associated with school failure, and that engagement or attachment to school attributed to a student's success. Klesse (2005) agrees with the center's findings. He suggests that student activities supplement a holistic academic program, and provide a reason for students to stay in school. Extracurricular activities help to main-

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tain the academic foundation through recognition and success not always found in a classroom setting (Cordts, 2005).

Societal Benefits

Eventually, society benefits from our student leaders. Educated citizens who possess leadership skills are the nation's biggest dependable resource (Connaughton, et al., 2003). It is the responsibility of educational institutions to offer leadership courses for the next generation's leaders to meet our nation's need for leaders (Connaughton, et al., 2003).

Democracy is learned by living it. Students exposed to democracy and citizenship at a younger age are more likely to actively participate in our democratic society later in life (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Woyach, 2000). Studies have shown a link between participating in structured extracurricular activities as an adolescent and community involvement in adulthood (Youniss, J., McLellan, J.A., & Yates, M., 1997).

Ladewig and Thomas found (as cited by Youniss, et al.) that students who are involved in clubs or student councils are 1.99 times more likely to belong to a community group than an uninvolved student. If they held office as a student then they are 2.89 times more likely to become an officer in a club as an adult. Additionally, in 1985 Verba, Schlozman and Brady (as cited by Youniss, et al.) discovered that the "two strongest predictors of adult involvement were participation in high school government and high school membership in clubs or interest groups, excluding athletics."

Student Body Benefits

A school's student body also reaps the benefits from a leadership class. Leadership students provide a wide range of low cost or free activities for the student body. These activities supplement student learning and adolescent development (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2002). Extracurricular activities extend learning and are, therefore, educational.

Marsh and Kleitman (2002) discovered that school based extracurricular activities benefited students more than activities out of school. They further added that the most beneficial activities included nonacademic activities (sports, student government, yearbook, and performing arts) and academic activities. Students involved in these activities had an

increased commitment to school values and a greater connection to their school (George, 2004).

Zill, Nord, & Loomis (1995) found that use of leisure time (participating in extracurricular activities or not) is a major predictor of participating in at risk activities. Zill et al. (1995) also found that 10th graders who did not participate in extracurricular activities were 57 percent more likely to drop out of school before they became seniors when compared to students who participated between one to four hours a week. In addition, students who didn't participate were 49 percent more likely to have used drugs and 37 percent more likely to become teen parents. In addition, when students participated between five and nineteen hours a week, they were even less likely to participate in at risk behaviors. A pattern emerged that students with lower economic status, lower levels of parental education, and uninvolved parents were less likely to participate in extracurricular activities during their free time.

Organized activities are an important arena for fostering skills and promoting positive youth and adolescent development. Participation is linked with innumerable benefits ranging from academic success, like graduating from college, to an increased sense of self-worth. These activities provide a firm foundation for students to transition from adolescence to a successful contributor to society.



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