LEARNING TO PLAY
AND PLAYING TO LEARN:
Organized Sports
and Educational Outcome

By Ann Rosewater
From Team Up For Youth

 MILLIONS of children participate in sports. Sports make up the largest category of after-school activities available for children and youth. What happens in the context of sports matters—it may affect how and what children learn, how they interact with others (adults and peers) and who those others are, and their capacity to regulate their emotional and physical development over time.

High-quality organized sports are a gateway to academic achievement, better grades, improved chances of attending college, and success in the labor market—and these benefits are especially important for low-income youth. My report analyzes several distinct strands of research on the effects on youth of participation in organized sports.

Over the years, researchers have examined this core issue from any number of perspectives. Findings have varied, depending on the nature of their inquiries, whom they asked, and how they compiled their data. Sometimes researchers developed data that seemed to contradict previous research. But more often their data reinforced a straightforward conclusion: that high-quality or-

Organized Sports and Educational Outcome

Organized sports engage students, teach them important skills, draw them into the task of learning, and connect them to fellow students and caring adults. An important result is a series of improved outcomes for students.

My report examines data on the impact of organized sports on the academic and intellectual achievement of students. The studies surveyed indicate that:

- Children and youth who participate in organized sports are higher achievers in terms of grades and dropout rates, as well as related measures of academic achievement, such as homework completion and educational aspirations.
- Physical activity, including participation in organized sports, produces intellectual and academic benefits that may have long-term positive effects on life chances.
- Participation in physical activity affects key brain functions critical to learning.
- Both boys and girls reap the achievement benefits of participation in organized sports.
- Participants in organized sports are more likely to attend college and to land better jobs with more responsibility and higher pay.

Regarding the impact of participation in organized sports on students' values and motivations, the data demonstrate that:

- Sports help children and youth feel better connected to school, attend regularly, and connect with a more positive peer network.
- Parents of high school students who participate more in sports have higher expectations for their children.
- Sports participation builds planning skills and provides the experience of failing and trying again (persistence)—experiences that provide a learning process that can translate to greater achievement in school.

Sports have an important effect on the development of children's peer networks. Research finds that:

- High school youth participating in organized sports view sports as providing a place to meet other young people "who had at least one shared interest."
- High school girls find participation in sports to be a way to break gender stereotypes, enhancing their sense of possibility.

The effects of participating in organized sports are as good or better for children from low-income families as for children from families with more income. The data show that:

- For children who are on the margin (e.g., poor, learning-
disabled, obese, gay), sports participation can minimize feelings of difference and isolation and increase the likelihood of attending college.

- Participation in organized sports may provide an opportunity for low-income children that other youth take for granted; as a result, the effects on academics and grades are more pronounced for poor children.
- Sports participation is correlated with improved grades or test scores among African American and Latino students.
- African American and Latina female athletes reported better grades in high school and greater involvement with extracurricular activities than female non-athletes.

Opportunities to participate in organized sports are not evenly distributed across the student population. The data show that:
- Adolescents from more affluent families are more likely to participate in organized activities than adolescents from low-income families.
- Asian Americans and Latinos are less likely to participate in sports than other ethnic groups.
- Disparities in participation are more pronounced in activities, such as sports and lessons, that require financial investment.
- Opportunities dwindle as students move from elementary to middle and high schools.
- Boys have more opportunities to participate in organized sports than girls, and girls’ opportunities to participate diminish more rapidly as they advance from elementary to high school.

Too many young people lack sufficient opportunities to participate in high-quality organized sports. The data show that:
- According to one study, about 75% of children from white middle class backgrounds participated in organized sports activities, while only 40% to 60% of low-income children of color did so.
- Urban girls, especially girls of color, often face higher barriers to participation, including outside jobs, cultural factors, and weaker parental support for sports involvement.
- Latino children report having fewer opportunities for safe outdoor play, and are less physically active than white children.

Based on these findings, I offer a series of recommendations for policy, practice, and research to ensure that organized sports programs fulfill their promise and enable participants to reach their educational goals.

Recommendations for Practice, Policy, and Research

The recommendations cross three major categories critical to
moving the sports-based youth development field toward a goal of improving educational outcomes for children and youth. The first two, program quality and equitable access to high-quality programs, are top priorities.

Careful evaluation of intentional improvements made in quality and access, and application of the findings of these assessments, will continue to advance these programs’ quality and stability and the likelihood that more children will participate and reap the benefits.

1. Strengthen the quality of programs to foster the attributes that lead to positive educational outcomes.

Connect sports-based youth development programs more deliberately to schools and learning.

- Require school attendance and/or performance and offer supports to help students meet these requirements.
- Explore collaborations with other programs or the inclusion of other components such as tutoring, creative writing, or other academically oriented activities.
- Employ teachers and other school staff in sports programs and hold programs at or near school sites.
- Create ways for coaches to serve as liaisons to the schools, either by having school staff work in the program or by establishing expected and regular interactions between coaching staff/volunteers and schools.

Create a conduit for trained, enthusiastic volunteer coaches and mentors to serve in low-income communities where they are needed most.

- Increase the number of volunteers in organized after-school sports programs through AmeriCorps, VISTA, and other volunteer initiatives.

Ensure that coaches are well prepared and supported to work with the youth in their programs.

- Be clear about coaches’ multiple roles, including as supporters of the school system’s academic goals, as mentors for participating youth, and as advisors for parents.
- Train coaches in principles of child and adolescent development, emotion regulation, and theories of learning.
- Communicate directly with schools about students’ academic status and help students get academic help when needed.
- Invest in regular supervisory support for coaches to promote stability and continuity.

Organize sports activities in a way that encourages and supports sustained parent participation.

- Set games at times that parents are more likely to be avail-
able, such as on weekends.
- Regularly provide information to parents about available high-quality organized sports opportunities. Ensure that information is responsive to parents’ cultural and linguistic needs.
- Use technology to communicate regularly with parents.
- Encourage parents, including mothers, to become coaches.
- Hold year-end events for parents and their children to celebrate successes together. Ensure that every young person is recognized for her or his participation.

Promote youth involvement in program design.
- Provide opportunities for children and youth to have a voice in determining the activities of interest to them.
- Support teens’ capacity for independent decision making while providing adult guidance.
- Give older youth increasingly responsible roles in the sports activities, including coaching younger children.
- Promote peer relationships and peer learning through group or team activities, including team decision making.

Take steps to avoid risky behaviors.
- Directly address the increased risk of alcohol abuse among athletes by offering alcohol and drug education, creating an alcohol-free pledge or policy or other strategies.

2. Improve access to and sustained participation in high-quality programs particularly for underserved children and youth: girls, low-income children, and youth of color.

Ensure that federal programs that support after-school activities are adequately funded and incorporate high-quality organized sports opportunities. Such programs include:
- 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, which supports the creation of community learning centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities during nonschool hours, particularly for students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. The program allows schools and community-based organizations to offer a broad array of enrichment activities, which can include sports.
- Carol M. White Physical Education Program, which provides grants to local education agencies and community organizations for physical education, including after-school programs.

Increase the number of high-quality programs in low-income communities.

- Broaden the view of education to incorporate after-school sports and other activities as an essential component. Frame after-school
Organized Sports and Educational Outcome

programs as “extended learning” with choices available that include high-quality organized sports.

Place programs in sites that children and parents can reach easily and safely.

- Ensure that affordable, preferably free, school or public transportation is available to sports programs to return children and youth home after the programs are completed.
- Expand and improve or create new sports environments that protect children and youth from the risks of unsafe neighborhoods.

Address financial barriers that preclude participation by low-income children.

- Provide free participation or, if fees are required, make them minimal.
- If fees must be charged, programs should offer and publicize scholarships, sliding fee scales, work opportunities, and other strategies that make participation affordable for the children and teens of low-income families.

Recognize and address parents’ needs and values.

- Educate parents about the benefits of sports participation, particularly for girls. Make the case that participation in organized and structured activities is beneficial to child and adolescent development and that participation is more about learning skills and connecting to academics than about competition.
- Strengthen teachers’, staff’s, and coaches’ sensitivity to parents’ cultural experiences, values, and belief systems as a way to help parents see the benefits of their children’s participation in sports.
- Educate parents about what makes a quality program. Strategies may include regularly providing information highlighting effective programs, offering a checklist for parents that identifies the components of quality programs, or developing a community-wide resource bank that enables parents to match their children’s needs.
- Engage parents through informational meetings and other outreach methods that encourage their attendance. Sessions that provide meals, child care, and programs that engage the whole family in activities can provide useful inducements for parents and other family members to participate. Highlighting stories of children who succeed may provide useful images that help parents connect participation with results.
- Identify enrollment policies that will accommodate the mobility of low-income, minority, and immigrant families.

Develop specific strategies to promote persistent and engaged participation.

- Design programs to promote
continuity of participation over time.

- Develop strategies to keep girls from dropping out of sports activities. Focus on girls in middle school, with special attention to girls of color, who have the highest attrition rates.

3. Increase investment in research and evaluation to improve program quality and opportunities for participation.

- Create and highlight models of quality at program, school-district, and city levels and study and replicate them. Look at differences in populations in terms of what makes programs most effective in improving educational outcomes.

- Design research to study what coaches do to promote emotion regulation and academic success. Follow the same line of inquiry as research on how teachers promote a positive learning climate.

- Evaluate programs with specific interventions designed to promote persistence and engagement in sports-based youth development programs, with special attention to middle school girls.

- Continue to examine the issues surrounding selection bias.

- Identify the characteristics of effective programs that enable them to attract and retain youth from groups with lower participation and higher attrition rates, such as girls, youth of color, and youth in low-income communities.

The educational benefits arising from participation in supervised and structured sports activities indicate the importance of ensuring that all children, especially those for whom participation has been limited, have these opportunities. Furthermore, the opportunities in which all children participate should build in the kinds of experiences and practices that researchers have found make a difference to their learning and success. While millions of America’s children participate regularly in sports, there are many who do not, especially among low-income children, children of color, and girls.

With such enormous potential residing in youth sports, it is critical to learn from the current knowledge base and continue to build it to help ensure that young people reap all the benefits possible from their participation.