

THE ADVOCATE



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Defining the Variables in the Student Activities Equation

BY KATHLEEN WILSON SHRYOCK

For a long time, student activities have been the subject of a curious chicken-or-egg style debate rooted in a classic either/or fallacy. Do student activities improve student performance or do better performing students participate in student activities? The implications of this debate have left stakeholders scrambling for answers, wondering if student activities should even be a part of educational reform. *Let X = Student Activities*, a new program developed by the Alliance for Student Activities and supported by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), proves that the answer to all of these questions is an emphatic “yes.”

A wealth of credible research indicates that activities are the spark that ignites positive, measurable improvement in student performance. The results are even more pronounced among students with previously low GPAs or discipline concerns. Through *Let X = Student Activities*, the Alliance is committed to providing stakeholders with the information, the tools, and the motivation needed to ensure that student activities become an indispensable part of every educational reform equation.

Research collected and highlighted by the Alliance indicates that participation in student activities improves performance in the classroom and on the test. In addition, studies show that appropriate activities reduce deviant behaviors, lower the dropout rate, and serve as a →

Impactful Student Activities

Adult-supervised

+ Student-Driven

+ School-Based

Students will Thrive

springboard to college and career success. “The real problem is that when it comes to participation, funding, and support, too many stakeholders say ‘no’ to student activities,” said Bob Tryanski, advocacy director for the Alliance. “They reduce activities’ budgets, eliminate elective programs, and redirect time, money, and resources to support instruction and testing without realizing that they are unwittingly undermining their students’ ability to thrive.” Tryanski equates the elimination and reduction of student activities to skipping questions on a standardized test. “When you cut student activities from the equation, you significantly limit your potential results. *Let X = Student Activities* helps anyone with a stake in education to do the math,” he said.

For Dr. Bryan Shelly, data strategist at the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and author of *Money, Mandates, and Local Control in American Public Education*, a thorough analysis of the research proves that—not only are student activities a positive intervention—but they are also an effective preventative for many of the ills present in today’s education arena. He encourages skeptics to review the findings for themselves. “The results are based on sophisticated data. The bottom line is that students will do better on the test when there is a vibrant student activities program in place,” he said. “The data backs it up.”

(For an annotated bibliography listing many of the research studies reviewed by Dr. Shelly, go to a4sa.org/bib)

Do the Math

Extensive research pioneered by Dr. Peter Benson at the Minneapolis-based Search Institute supports the *Let X = Student Activities* equation. For more than twenty years, the nonprofit institute has been performing research that seeks to define and measure thriving among young people. In 2003, they joined with experts at Tufts University, Stanford University, and Fuller Theological Seminary to conduct a series of studies aimed at explaining and promoting positive youth development. This research revealed that the secret to student success is rooted in the language of human thriving—a concept indicating that people do best when they are engaged in something that brings them joy, energy, and direction. In other words, the best development occurs when kids are lit from within by their own special “spark.”

Search Institute researchers also identified the presence of champions (adult mentors) as a key factor in a student’s ability to thrive. They stressed that, not only do students need familial support, but they also need encouragement from adult mentors at school and in the community. Finally, the researchers defined opportunity, the chance to practice and develop the spark in a positive environment, as the last variable in the human thriving equation. And, while a spark may be directed toward an academic pursuit, it can just as easily be displayed as a talent, skill, hobby, or commitment.

To sum it up, the ability to thrive can be represented as:

**Spark + Three Champions + Opportunity
= Ability to Thrive**

Unfortunately, research from Search Institute also indicates that many of today’s youth are in danger of losing their spark. In fact, evidence from their 2003–2010 body of research shows that only 25% of high school students are on the road to human thriving. The other 75% have lost their way. They no longer have a strong sense of purpose, and they feel disconnected from their schools and communities.

Through *Let X = Student Activities*, the Alliance is determined to improve these statistics by ensuring that student activities are a critical part of every school’s master plan. By its very nature, the student activities arena is the perfect venue for providing students with valuable opportunities to discover and practice their spark. In addition, activities connect students with adult champions who can provide direction and support. The Alliance’s review of the research also indicates that student activities reap the biggest benefits when three specific variables are present: the activities must be adult-supervised, student-driven, and school-based. Alliance experts have included these variables in their student activities formula:

**Adult-supervised + Student-driven + School-based
= Impactful Student Activities
= Students Will Thrive**

“Each of the components in Search Institute’s equation for human thriving becomes available to students when they get involved in a school-sponsored, adult-supervised, student-driven activity,” said Tryanski. “It doesn’t matter whether it happens through athletics, the arts, student government, service learning, or something as unconventional as a simulation gaming society. That combination of connecting a student’s spark to adult mentoring and opportunity drives performance as well as the development of social and emotional skills.”

With more than 28 years in the field of student activities, John Glimco has served as a director of student activities, as a middle school principal, and as an assistant superintendent for the DuPage Regional Office of Education in Illinois. He is also a founding member of the Alliance. Glimco’s reviews of the research and his experience in education have made it easy for him to connect the dots between classroom achievement and student activities. “We are not talking about resume building through activities that focus only on quantity rather than quality and value,” he said. “We are talking about activities that help students develop meaningful interests, interests that will make a difference at the collegiate level and beyond.”

Glimco points out that quality, well-planned activities correlate directly with the four R’s of education: research, relationships, rigor, and relevancy. When combined with the parameters prescribed by the Alliance, the four R’s can be applied to an effective student activities framework. For example:

RESEARCH: Data from many sources supports the positive relationship between classroom achievement and student activities.

RELATIONSHIPS: Faculty involvement facilitates the development of additional key connections.

RIGOR: Activities that are student-driven are viewed as valuable by the students and encourage real participation.

RELEVANCY: Activities that take place on campus can be integrated into the culture of the school and help students develop valuable connections.

Glimco encourages administrators and all stakeholders to commit to the provision of quality activities. “In order for activities to be meaningful, they must be treated with consistency and the same level of importance as academics,” he suggested. “If the activity is important enough for our students to invest their time in it, then we need to treat it that way and not as an afterthought.”

Supervised by Adults

Mike Smith, a founding member of the Alliance and president of DifferenceMakers, Ltd., notes that faculty involvement is an important variable that provides students with much-needed validation. It also enhances their overall connection to the school. “Relevance starts with relationships,” he said. “It doesn’t have to be warm and fuzzy. Just expressing an interest, showing students that someone cares and wants to know about them is enough to open the door to a respectful relationship that promotes community building. Staff involvement through mentoring confirms the significance of individual contributions. School climate is no longer defined just by the classroom but by the relationships as well.”

Glimco agrees that the presence of an adult mentor adds value. “It’s so important for students and faculty to see each other in a different context,” he said. “Involvement in programs where an adult acts as an appropriate, positive mentor not only improves interpersonal relationships but also adds to the connection between the student and the school, the classroom, and—ultimately—academics. It allows students to build on a relationship piece that might otherwise be missing. And it provides faculty members with opportunities to catch students doing the right things.”

Driven by Students

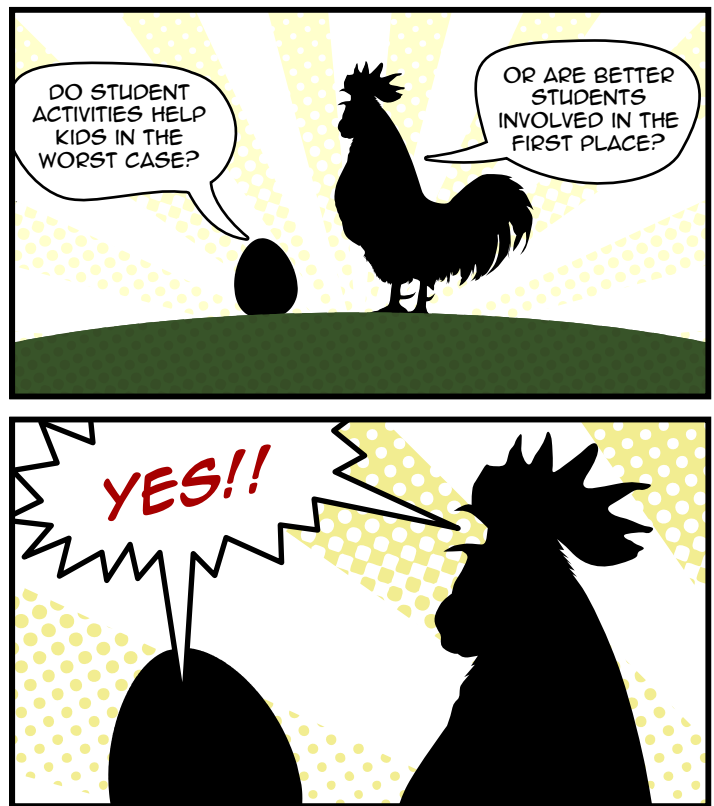
While adult mentorship is important, student activities are most impactful when students are placed in the driver’s seat. Smith believes that student activities are ideal for capitalizing on the near-peer principle. “Kids are most influenced by other kids,” he noted. “Activities empower student leaders to become great near-peer role models for the rest of the student body. They provide a valuable voice that speaks to the school community, and the adults can benefit from their insight.” In addition, Smith points out that the near-peer concept illustrates that kids from all types of backgrounds can be influenced when they spend quality time at school with other kids who want to be there and who are engaged in positive behaviors.

Shelly advises that permission for students to be in control should be an iron-clad requirement for any activities program. Not only should students be involved in activity selection, but they should also be responsible for organization and long-term planning including fundraising. “For activities to be really effective, kids need to be able to see that an activity has a tangible effect on their lives,” he noted. “They must have autonomy in that they are the ones making the decisions. Adult support comes in the form of respecting the efforts of the students and allowing the kids to see the positive consequences of their own actions.”

Based at School

While adult supervision and student leadership are key variables, it’s also important for a healthy program to host activities that are school-based. This feature allows school officials to implement rules and safety guidelines that are consistent with campus and district policies. In addition, on-site activities encourage students to establish vital connections to the school.

Beyond academics, activity participation lets students view the school as a place where they can nurture their spark. Smith notes that the school becomes a living laboratory where students, peers, and faculty members are all working together. “When we host student activities on campus, we are creating a climate that is engaging—a community where we are not only doing things for the student body, but we are doing things with them.”



Smith encourages educators to continue searching for creative ways to invest in school-sponsored programs. “High school is where we determine who we are,” he said. “And student activities are the lab where we learn real life applications such as the skills to collaborate, organize, negotiate, and compromise. As educators and adults, it’s our responsibility to provide kids with opportunities to learn who they are and to develop the skills that will prepare them for college, work, and community.”

JoAnn Bartoletti, executive director of NASSP agrees that student activities are a crucial part of any education equation. “The Alliance for Student Activities has brought together the research, media, and training to confirm what we’ve known anecdotally for a long time; school-based, adult-supervised, student-driven activities provide positive opportunities for student success,” she said. “Not only does participation in student activities generate a better school climate that promotes greater achievement levels for all students, but they are affordable and cost effective. Participation in student activities is also one of the most efficient ways to proactively address issues such as dropout rates, teen pregnancy, bullying, and substance abuse. We are very pleased to be working together to change the conversation about our educational priorities.”

The results are in, and the research all points to the same conclusion. *Let X = Student Activities* provides concrete evidence that supports the development and implementation of strong student activities programs. In addition, the correlation between student activities and student achievement applies to common core learning standards, increased test scores, and the social and emotional learning skills that help to shape compassionate, responsible adults. In spite of all of this, research shows that the average tenth grader spends less than one hour a week participating in activities at school...and that simply isn’t enough. So what can you do? Make the time, do the math, promote the value, and be a champion.

When you Let X = Student Activities, performance will follow. ●



Kristyn Stewart facilitates after-school programs with children in Philadelphia

Meet Kristyn Stewart

Activity Enrichment through an After-School Alliance

KRISTYN STEWART is the director of the Philadelphia Center for Arts and Technology (PCAT). Located in Northwest Philadelphia, the vibrant community center is sponsored by Foundations, Inc., a nonprofit organization committed to improving educational experiences for America's youth. PCAT serves a population that is in the midst of a district-wide education emergency and helps to fill the gap left by struggling schools that can no longer offer valuable arts and activities programs. In addition to academic assistance, PCAT offers after-school enrichment programs centered on the arts.

Why are after-school programs like the ones at PCAT so important in an area like Philadelphia?

Schools in Philadelphia are closing. Some of our students have attended three or more different schools within just a few years. The class sizes are huge, and programs that allow for career exploration and a focus on the arts are not available. The community center offers consistency and opportunity. It is one of the few places where kids and their parents still have a choice in what activities they want to pursue. They can build 21st century skills—skills for life and for work—explicitly through art, dance, technology, music, or leadership programs; things that the schools here no longer have the capacity to provide.

What are some of the programs offered by PCAT?

In Full STEAM Ahead, middle school students use hands-on experimentation and performing arts to learn about biology, ecology, and technology. Designing U is a new program that teaches ninth and tenth graders how to employ skills needed to succeed in today's economy. Program units include: architectural and interior design, music production, and media design.

How can administrators, educators, and others in the community provide support to after-school programs?

While support from administrators is critical, it does not have to be difficult or time consuming. Stopping by the community center to touch base with students, offering meeting or storage space in the school, and simply sharing information about the programs can encourage students and their parents to make positive connections between the school and the after-school initiative.

Administrators and teachers can partner with the after-school staff to facilitate communication with students and their parents, especially if a student is struggling.

The school staff can talk with program directors about areas in the curriculum that are especially challenging for students so that after-school programs can be tailored to meet these needs.

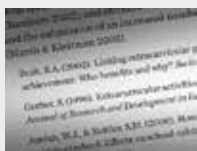
Educators can present after-school programs as a place that can benefit *all* students regardless of performance rather than using program attendance as a reward or a punishment.

PCAT programs rely on funding through sources like the 21st Century Community Learning Center. While many schools do apply for funding, there is a cap on the amount that they can receive. Additionally, some districts do not have a development team or the man power to complete the lengthy applications. Stakeholders can help by searching for local companies and showing decision makers that support for after-school programs today is an investment in the employees and community leaders of tomorrow. ●

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT PCAT or to search for Foundations, Inc. programs in your area, go to **foundationsinc.org**.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT FUNDING through 21st Century Community Learning Centers, visit **a4sa.org/21stccclc**.

AFTER-SCHOOL RESOURCES



STUDENT ACTIVITIES RESEARCH SUMMARY
Where do we get our research? Download an annotated bibliography and delve deeper into the facts. **a4sa.org/bibliography**



THE AFTERSCHOOL ALLIANCE
Their mission is to ensure that all children have access to quality, affordable after-school programs. They strive to increase public and private investment for these initiatives at the national, state, and local levels. This link provides excellent funding and sustainability resources.

a4sa.org/resources



SPIRIT WORKS America's most popular resource for ways to improve school spirit is *Spirit Works... Turn It On!* The 5th edition contains nearly 1,000 specific ideas covering class competition games, pep rally organization, noontime activities, staff appreciation ideas, and fundraising ideas.



ALLIANCE TIP SHEETS How do you make the time, promote the value, and become a champion for student activities? The Alliance has produced a set of tip sheets for administrators, teachers, advisers, and parents with suggestions that you can use to become a more effective advocate for school-based, adult-supervised, student-driven activities.

Schools in Crisis: Philly Students Rally for the Return of Activities

IT'S THE PERFECT STORM. High poverty, excessive unemployment, distressed public pension funds, and one of the highest tax rates in the nation have combined to create an education crisis in Philadelphia, PA. The school district is facing a \$300 million shortfall for its next fiscal year. Schools are closing and staff has been reduced. It is no surprise that arts, activities, and athletics programs have been on the chopping block for some time.

With the quality of their education on the line, students are demanding access to schools that provide improved opportunities. The Philadelphia Student Union (PSU), an advocacy group that gives students a voice about important local issues, has organized student rallies and has been canvassing neighborhoods to spread the word about education reform.

In a formal directive to district decision makers, PSU organizers are calling for strong student support networks including the addition of guidance counselors and the return of arts, sports, and music programs. Students like Deion Ferguson, 16, understands what happens when schools lack the ability to offer engaging programs. "No one wants to go to school now," said Ferguson. "Taking opportunities from students will lead to dropouts."

TO READ MORE about the Philadelphia school crisis and the proactive efforts of students, view this article from NBC10 in Philadelphia a4sa.org/psu

TO LEARN HOW after-school arts and activities programs are being used to provide student enrichment in the midst of Philadelphia's school budget crisis, see BE A CHAMPION in this issue of *The Advocate*.

FOR MORE INFORMATION on Philadelphia Student Union, go to www.phillystudentunion.org ●



Collaborate and Communicate with Inter-Club Councils

WHEN MARK SKOWRON took over the reins as student activities coordinator at Lancaster Central High School in Lancaster, NY, he and Principal Cesar Marchioli wanted to create a structure that would facilitate communications between the more than 100 clubs, sports teams, and other special interest groups at the school. With the help of students, they developed Students Working to Improve the School Setting (S.W.I.S.S.), an inter-club council that allows students to share information about events, collaborate on common goals, and establish communications with administrators and other staff members.

Organizationally, S.W.I.S.S. is recognized as a standing committee within the student council. Representatives from each student activity group are appointed by the student council president and agree to attend a meeting every other month. In addition to the student representatives, the principal, assistant principal, lead custodian, cafeteria representative, athletic director, and school resource officer also attend. The attendance of key adults not only allows students to provide information on club initiatives, but it also validates the students' voices and provides a forum where they can share information about things that need to be done around the school.

Skowron explains that with over 2,000 students on campus, it's easy to get lost in information overload. The inter-club council makes it easier for students and staff to coordinate event times, schedule facilities, and build support for diverse activities. In addition, students are practicing skills in a formal meeting setting and establishing important relationships with peers and adult staff members.

At Centennial High School in Las Vegas, NV, student council adviser Michael Collins has had a positive experience with the inter-club council at his school. His council operates with a similar structure. The student council oversees the workings of the inter-club council, and meetings are attended by club representatives, a school administrator, and other faculty advisers.

In addition to streamlining communication, the meetings help advisers and administrators stay involved with student activities. Collins believes that the council has also helped students form important connections with peers from groups that they might not usually associate with. "The students are able to share information about their event, what it means to them, and why it is important in their own words," he said. "The inter-club council has not only made communication easier, but students are able to ask for assistance from the student council. It spurs cooperation and even attendance at events."

HERE IS A LOOK INTO how other schools are utilizing inter-club councils:

- a4sa.org/ardreykell
- a4sa.org/arroyo
- a4sa.org/riohondo ●

MAKE THE TIME

Take Five: Turning Your Minutes Into Teachable Moments

IT DOESN'T TAKE A LOT OF TIME to become a significant champion for student activities. Small, incremental adjustments to your regular routine can add up quickly and will make a huge difference to students who are on the outside looking in. Imagine what might happen if you and your colleagues took the following simple steps:

- **Spend three minutes** in the halls connecting with individual students, talking about their interests, and suggesting opportunities to connect their interests with activities.
- **Take five minutes** a day to personally acknowledge, praise, and thank an adviser, coach, or sponsor for their time and commitment to student activities.
- **Agree to advise** a club, coach a sport, or sponsor a co-curricular activity.
- **Offer to let a new club** like the chess club or robotics team meet in your classroom, after school, while you're grading papers or preparing lesson plans.
- **Team up with your school's Parent-Teacher Association (PTA).** Volunteer to lend your talents, insight, and experience in support of student activities.
- **Invite a student** to help with a specific project that could use his or her talent.
- **Show up at games, plays, dances, and other events** so kids know you support their efforts.
- **Take ten minutes** each week to learn more about the research linking student activity participation with academic performance. Share what you've learned in individual conversations with all stakeholders.
- **Recruit uninvolved students** for specific projects to give them a taste of involvement. ●

PROMOTE THE VALUE

the good news

participation in student activities

reduces dropout rates







increases standardized test scores

boosts GPAs

promotes college and career success

develops social and emotional skills

leads students to make better choices


impact of non-athletic, after school activities on standardized test scores: *

8th grade		10th grade	
reading scores	up 2.2%	reading scores	up 4.0%
math scores	up 2.9%	math scores	up 5.7%


* Journal of Educational Research, Schreiber and Chambers, 2002

the bad news


most students aren't taking advantage of the extracurricular opportunities available to them




the average tenth grade student spends less than one hour each week involved in school-sponsored, adult-supervised, student-driven arts, athletics, or activities**



If students don't participate in arts, athletics, or activities, they miss valuable opportunities that set them up to thrive in school, in life, in college, and in careers



** Money, Mandates and Local Control in American Public Education, Shelly, 2011



Make the time.

Alliance for Student Activities

a4sa.org

THE ADVOCATE

The Advocate is published ten times a year by the Alliance for Student Activities, a nonprofit corporation whose mission is to promote the value of student activities through advocacy, training, resources, and networking.

a4sa.org

Submissions of student activities research and other inquiries are welcome. Contact advocate@a4sa.org

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