

# Should Your School Get Rid of Sports?

Two writers face off on the role of athletics in American education.



Football players at Premont Independent, where sports were suspended in the spring of 2012.

## YES! It's Time to Scale Back

BY AMANDA RIPLEY

Every year, thousands of teenagers move to the United States from all over the world, for all kinds of reasons. They observe everything in their new country with fresh eyes. One thing consistently surprises them: “Sports are a big deal here,” says Jenny, who moved to the U.S. from South Korea in 2011.

Shawnee High, Jenny’s school in New Jersey, has teams in 18 sports. The campus has lush grass fields, six tennis courts, and an athletic Hall of Fame. By contrast, in South Korea, Jenny’s classmates played pickup soccer on a dirt field at lunchtime. If they were in the local newspaper, it was because of their academic achievements, not because they won a game.

fun—the emphasis on sports has gone too far.

### Sports Suspension

In the spring of 2012, Premont Independent School District in Premont, Texas, was in trouble. The state had threatened to shut it down for financial problems and academic failures. To cut costs, the district had moved the middle

Sports are embedded in American schools in a way they are not almost anywhere else in the world. Yet this fact rarely comes up in conversations about why America lags behind other countries academically. More than 20 nations have better high school graduation rates. And while sports do have many benefits—providing exercise, lessons in perseverance, school spirit, and just plain

school to the high school building; the elementary school hadn’t had a music teacher in years; and the high school had sealed off the science labs, which were infested with mold. Yet they still had football, basketball, volleyball, track, tennis, cheerleading, and baseball teams.

So Superintendent Ernest Singleton made a bold decision: He canceled sports.

*All of them.*

By suspending sports, he realized, the district could save \$150,000 in one year.

### Big Costs

In many schools, sports are so entrenched that no one realizes their actual cost. New bleachers can cost half a million dollars. Maintaining a grass field can cost more than \$20,000 a year. When teacher-coaches travel for games, schools have to hire substitutes. They also need to pay for buses for the team, the band, and the cheerleaders, not to mention meals and hotels on the road. For home games, schools often pay

for security, painting the lines on the field, and cleaning up. Concessions—that is, snacks sold at games—rarely cover these costs.

Distraction, however, may be the greatest cost of all. During football season in particular, focus shifts away from learning. Players spend long hours practicing, and that commitment extends to the rest of the school—from late-night band practices and pep rallies to meetings with parents.

Athletics even dictate when school starts: Despite research showing that later start times improve student performance, many schools begin before 8 a.m., partly to reserve afternoon daylight hours for athletic practice.

### Eerily Quiet

Fall of 2012 at Premont was eerily quiet. There were no Friday night games to look forward to, no cheerleaders making posters in the hallway.

But this quiet had an upside. That first semester, 80 percent of students passed their classes, compared with 50 percent the

previous fall. About 160 people attended parent-teacher night, compared with six the year before.

“There was all this extra time,” says Nathan, a former Premont quarterback, who began playing club football on weekends. “You never got behind on your work.”

Today, Premont has no debt, and the district will stay open. The science labs have even been repaired. This past spring, Premont brought back baseball, track, and tennis, but in a limited way. (The teams are allowed to travel to one tournament a season, for example.)

The district has a lot of work to do before its students can feel the kind of pride in their academics that they once felt in their sports teams. But students have proved their ability to adapt.

Will more schools follow Premont’s lead?

They should. ●

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DO YOU AGREE?  
 Turn the page to read an  
 opposing point of view!



Why would anyone want to prevent moments like this one?

# NO! Sports Are More Important Than Ever

BY TIM O'SHEI

It's 11:30 the night before a big test, and you still have four more chapters to study.

You're exhausted, but you won't be able to sleep—you're too jittery. Your fingers tap the desk, and your mind races about what will happen if you fail. Thank goodness you have track tomorrow morning! Practices and meets are the key to your sanity.

Being a student today is harder than ever. You are being held to tougher academic standards—and so is your school. The stress can get so intense, it feels paralyzing.

That's why it is more important than ever for schools to invest in their athletics programs.

## Smarter and Healthier

It's not just the future Lebrons and Jeters who benefit from school sports. When you're stressed, your brain releases hormones that can interfere with your ability to sleep and concentrate—not exactly a recipe for academic achievement. Physical activity can be the **antidote**. Stepping away from your books for softball practice can help sharpen your brain. According to a 2013 report from the Institute of

Medicine, physically active kids have more focus, are better problem solvers, and score higher on tests. A 2012 study by the Datalys Center found that young athletes have higher scores in math and English than those who don't participate in sports.

We've known about the relationship between the body and the brain for ages. In ancient Greece, becoming a scholar athlete was a great achievement, one worthy of honor. The ancient Greeks understood that to discipline the body

was to discipline the mind. Sports and learning went hand in hand. Today, studies show that schools with big athletics programs tend to have lower dropout rates.

But it's not just about grades. Time spent on the field or on the court also improves your health.

## Equal Opportunity

It is true that many schools are facing serious budget crunches, and the price tag on athletics programs can be cringe-worthy. But that doesn't mean we should give up on the **beloved** American tradition of school sports.

Public schools are all about "equal opportunity." This term means that everyone, no matter who they are, receives the same opportunities. If we cut back school sports, some kids will find themselves shut out of sports completely. Yes, club sports—that is, private leagues outside of school—would be an option for some, but fees, equipment, and travel expenses can add up to thousands of dollars per season. Many kids' parents can't afford that.

## Go Team!

Young athletes develop skills that go beyond the ability to shoot a three-pointer or defend a goal. To be a good team player, you need to be reliable, hardworking, disciplined, and willing to share the glory. You need to be able to work as part of a team and be a gracious winner as well as a gracious loser. These skills will serve you in many areas of your life, from your relationships with your friends to your future jobs.

Even if you're not an athlete, if you just like to cheer your friends from the stands, chances are you're benefiting from your school's sports. **Rallying** around a team is exciting. It creates a feeling of community that can bring a whole school together in a positive way.

So next time you hear talk of suspending sports in school, speak up. We can't let this important tradition disappear. ●

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# What Do You Think?

**Should we scale back school sports?** In the columns below, write details that Amanda Ripley and Tim O'Shei use to make their arguments.



## YES

SAY GOODBYE TO SPORTS

1 Athletics programs put a financial burden on cash-strapped schools.

2

3

## NO

SPORTS SHOULD STAY

1

2

3

**EXAMINE POINTS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE DEBATE—AS WELL AS YOUR OWN BELIEFS**—and decide what you think. Should we scale back school sports in the U.S.? State your opinion in one sentence below. This can become the thesis statement for an argument essay.

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