**Educational Athletics: The Key for a Successful Future
by David V. Stead, Executive Director**

The financial picture for Minnesota’s public schools is a front-burner topic for each and every citizen in our state. As budgets shrink, activity programs are as "at risk" as some of the most challenging students in our schools. The values embedded in educational athletic and fine arts programs are threatened by some philosophies that say "take the best and leave the rest."

Outside the schoolhouse doors, team membership is often predetermined, and some athletes, as early as second or third grade, are told they don’t measure up. Entrepreneurs and well-intentioned, organized athletic groups promise college scholarships and dreams of a professional career. The truth is that only a select few of the thousands of students who participate in athletics in Minnesota will ever play at the college or professional level. In the mid-1980’s, Arnold and Hulda Grobman from St. Louis University looked at professional athletes in football, basketball, baseball, hockey, tennis and boxing.

Their study revealed that for every **single** opening in professional athletics, there will be:

* 325 openings for teachers
* 60 openings for physicians
* 125 openings for occupational therapists, physical therapists and health technologists
* 10 openings for architects
* 75 openings for attorneys
* 15 openings for dentists
* 80 openings for computer programmers
* 20 openings for librarians
* 40 openings for social workers

Only two out of 100 high school athletes will ever play in college, and only one out of 12,000 high school athletes will ever become professional players.

But educational athletic programs provide far more than scholarship dreams, state championships or personal glory. Educational activities are an extension of the curriculum. They are a focus for a community. They provide opportunities for students from "their" community to work together. They extend childhood dreams and opportunities for ALL students.

Like all aspects of our changing world, we live in the best of times and the worst of times. No matter how good the school or how good the home, students are significantly affected by their external environment. They live with technology that is shrinking our nation and world.

Today’s youth deal with ethnic diversity, gender equity, economic uncertainty, new government regulations, interventions of the courts, and a society that refuses to accept the word "no." In an article written for the Interscholastic Athletic Administrator publication, Dr. David Landswerk, former superintendent in Wayzata, said, "Statistics show that students spend 21 hours a week watching television, 28 hours a week with "their" music, and seven minutes each day in meaningful conversation with their parents."

The Minnesota Prevention Resource Center found that, "69% of high school seniors report use of alcohol in the past year, and thirty-three percent report binge drinking in the last two weeks." The Partnership for a Drug-Free America found that," 9.7 percent of youths aged 12-17 reported current use of illicit drugs. Since 1999, teen use of Ecstasy has increased by 71%." Additionally, "4% of teens report using cocaine and crack in the past month. Marijuana remains the most widely used illicit drug with 41 percent of teens reporting experimentation at some point, and 21 percent reporting use in the past month."

The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse report published on February 8, 2002, states that, "In 2000, approximately 61 percent of youths aged 12 to 17, or more than 14 million, participated in team sports during the past year. Rates in January of 2002 for tobacco, alcohol, or illicit drugs were generally lower among teen sport participants. Team sports participants were more likely than non-participants to disapprove of peers’ use of cigarettes, alcohol, or marijuana."

There is no better time in history than now to assert the value of high school activities in developing and, in some cases, saving our young people. First of all, high school activities support the Academic Mission of our Schools. They are an extension of a good educational program. Students who participate in activities tend to have higher grade-point averages, better attendance, lower dropout rates, and cause fewer discipline problems.

A second benefit of participation in activities is that they are inherently educational for **all**. Activities are logically linked to the objectives of the over-all educational program. Their primary purpose is to meet the school related interests and needs of students that are not provided sufficiently by the curricular program. And the key word is the word **ALL**—not just the active and talented students.

A third benefit of participation in activities is the opportunity for the student to develop interpersonal and physical skills. The attributes of a good human being can be taught in a classroom, but it is on the playing fields, stages, and in performance halls where they are practiced. Experiences that allow students to understand other people’s feelings occur when they are able to compete and perform with other human beings. They learn socialization skills like sharing ideas, trusting, problem solving, accepting criticism and emotional control. They are provided valuable lessons in teamwork, sportsmanship, the nature of success and failure and hard work.

Participation fosters success in later life. In fact, participation is often a predictor of later success in college, in a career and as a contributing member of society. James Pressley, Associate Professor of Education at East Carolina University, reported that, "Participation levels vary by area, but usually 50% of the student body participates in at least one activity in today’s average high school. This is voluntary involvement and a commitment of 10 to 15 hours a week to learn something they want to know."

Students willingly make this kind of commitment . . . and MORE! Minnesota’s student-athletes have been successful because they have:

* an opportunity to work toward a goal
* coaches, advisors and schools that provide educationally-based athletic, fine arts and academic programs
* administrators who understand their needs to excel in both school and educational co-curricular activities
* parents who help them know that hard work and dedication are essential ingredients in a recipe for success

Yet, for some reason, activity programs are where we typically make cuts because these vital activities, integral to the school curriculum, intrinsic to the development of our youth and vital to future success, are perceived as "extra."

The results of participation continue far beyond high school. One study of high-ranking executives in America’s largest companies found that 95 percent had participated in high school sports, 54 percent were involved in student government, 37 percent in music, 35 percent in Scouts, and 18 percent in school publications.

The American College Testing Service looked at four factors for predicting success in life after college. The single yardstick that effectively predicted success in life was achievement in high school activities. The other three didn’t predict success well at all. The three losing predictors?

* High grades in high school
* High grades in college
* High scores on the ACT test

If taxpayers or the school board decide that some or all school activities should be paid for with donations, bake sales, raffles, and participation fees, these activities are thought to be less educational than the programs fully sponsored by the school. So, if we care about students’ future success, we should do nothing to frustrate their access to participation in activities. No fees. No fund-raising. No elimination of programs.

The final determiner of our success is the number of students participating in athletics, speech, music, publication and drama programs. Only when we involve as many students as possible in as many activities as possible have we reached the full potential. It is a small investment that affects students in a big way.

And let’s not forget how the community benefits . . . the spirit and pride engendered in successful exploits . . . the entertainment through plays and concerts . . . the parental involvement and increased interest in school . . . the rapport established in the community between adults and students . . . the instilling of socially acceptable values and norms including respect for rules and authority. All of these and more are a by-product of our high school activities programs.

If we truly believe that activities are educational experiences that make young people better individuals, then we must be prepared to defend that belief with more than just opinion. We must be prepared to fund that belief.

Students need the support of Minnesota communities. They need the benefits high school activities provide through character building concepts of respect of self and others, the opportunities to develop life-long skills, the ability to practice the concepts they’ve been taught in the classroom, and the chance to develop the interpersonal and physical skills that foster success in later life.

Schools need this involvement by students and parents to be successful. High school activity programs are the glue that helps hold communities together. They should be embraced in times of budget difficulties and not set adrift to fend for themselves.

The fully educated student has participated in both academic and non-academic activities, both athletic and non-athletic; has been a star in one activity and a substitute in another; has been on stage in one activity and back stage in another; has participated in solo and ensemble, and has experienced winning and losing. If we truly support our all-inclusive educational philosophy, schools in the future should have fully funded activity programs with everyone required to take something. Why? Because it works. It works on a higher level of success than anything else. And it works for all levels of ability.

We must continue to be proactive in meeting the needs of our students. Our state’s success, in fact our nation’s success, depends on you.