Education-Based Athletics: Selling It to Your School Board

By Peg Pennepacker, CAA, and Dan Schlafer, CMAA

School boards across the country are constantly under pressure to justify every dollar spent in ways that tie directly to student outcomes, academic performance and equitable use of limited funding. According to a Brookings Institute study (2025), school boards should focus budget deliberations on student outcomes and financial sustainability when making budget decisions.

At the same time, many school boards are facing tough decisions on funding priorities as budgets tighten and districts juggle academic program needs, safety and extracurricular demands. This makes education-based framing of athletics – where sports aren't just "fun" but an integral part of student development and achievement – a compelling and strategically relevant message.

Today, school boards are being urged to base budget discussions on measurable results – things like improved attendance, engagement, social–emotional learning (SEL) and graduation rates. When dealing with budget constraints such as inflation, enrollment changes and federal or state funding cutbacks, school boards now require clear evidence of value.

Showing that a school's interscholastic athletics program fosters student belonging and mental health, boosts attendance, positive behavior, academic achievement, graduation rates and improves post-secondary readiness to name a few things, will go a long way when school boards are making decisions during the budget process.

On many school board agendas, athletics appear in the same column as transportation overruns, school safety demands and aging facilities: necessary, visible and expensive. In a time of tight budgets, academic accountability and heightened scrutiny of every program that falls outside the traditional classroom, school boards often ask a fair but pointed question about school sports: *What is the educational return on this investment?*

To answer this question, school officials and athletic administrators must make a concerted effort to help school boards understand the concept and importance of education-based athletic programs.

For athletic administrators and school leaders, the answer cannot rest on trophies, tradition or community passion alone. To be sustained and understood, interscholastic athletics must be framed not as an extracurricular cost, but as an intentionally designed educational program that advances student learning, equity and engagement in ways few other school experiences can.

The mission of interscholastic athletics cannot only focus on wins and losses but must truly be about equity, academic alignment and measurable student outcomes. Therefore, the conversations with school boards and school administrators have had to change.

In today's education climate of fiscal restraint and heightened accountability, even longstanding athletic programs are being asked to justify their place alongside core instructional priorities. That reality requires education leaders to shift how they talk about sports in schools – not as tradition or extracurricular activity, but as a purpose-driven educational program with clear learning outcomes, governance structures and value to the school district's mission. Selling education-based athletics to a school board is no longer about passion; it is about data-driven decision-making.

Athletic administrators are uniquely positioned to lead this shift because they operate at the intersection of instruction, operations and community expectations. No other role sees as clearly how coaching practices reinforce academic behaviors, how eligibility policies shape student accountability, or how participation affects attendance, conduct and belonging. When athletic administrators frame athletics through an educational lens – using the same language of outcomes, equity and continuous improvement that school boards expect from academic programs – they elevate interscholastic athletics from a line item to a learning environment.

Left unstated, that story will be told by others who do not have the professional insight. Led intentionally by the athletic department leadership, it becomes a powerful extension of the school district's educational mission. Athletic administrators and school leaders must use the tools already at their disposal to justify and give credibility to the school's interscholastic athletics program by utilizing the tools that school boards value most. These tools are readily available to athletic administrators through attendance trends, eligibility data, discipline records, graduation rates and student survey results that should be included to demonstrate how participation in education-based athletics supports the mission and priorities of the school district.

Listed are talking points for athletic administrators to consider when advocating the importance of and support for education-based athletics to their school board:



- Education-based athletics is one of the few places in the educational system where students consistently practice the skills that are often valued the most: accountability, teamwork, perseverance, leadership, collaboration and time management, just to name a few. These are not abstract traits; these traits and values show up in attendance, behavior and engagement in the classroom.
- From an educational standpoint, interscholastic athletics provide something classrooms alone often cannot: daily, applied learning in a real-world environment. Students receive immediate feedback, are held to clear standards, and experience consequences tied directly to effort and preparation. That mirrors best instructional practice. Coaches, when properly trained and evaluated, function as educators who reinforce school district expectations around conduct, eligibility and academic responsibility.
- From a school governance perspective, interscholastic athletics support several school board priorities at once. Participation is strongly connected to improved attendance and lower discipline incidents. For many students – especially those marginal students – athletics are the primary reason they remain connected to school and trusted adults. That makes interscholastic athletics not a privilege, but a retention and engagement strategy.
- Equity also matters and is crucial. Education-based athletics programs are intentionally designed to provide access, structure and support – not just opportunities for elite athletes. When we align participation policies, transportation and coaching expectations with school district equity goals, interscholastic athletics become one of the most visible and effective ways a school district demonstrates inclusion and belonging.
- Education-based athletics in schools is not an argument based on tradition or trophies. It is an argument based on outcomes. Schools should measure interscholastic athletics the same way they evaluate other programs: attendance trends, academic eligibility, graduation rates, student surveys and behavior data. When viewed through that lens, interscholastic athletics moves from a line-item expense in a school district's budget to a program that actively supports student success and school district goals.
- Cutting and marginalizing interscholastic athletics is less likely to produce the savings people expect. What it often produces instead are unintended consequences such as increased disengagement, higher discipline costs and fewer structured opportunities for students to connect with the school community. Education-based athletics programs, when governed intentionally, are a preventive investment, not an optional add-on.

When paired with clear coaching expectations, intentional and documented skill development, and regular program evaluation, these measures give school boards something they rarely receive about athletics: evidence. Not only evidence of competitive success, but proof of learning, engagement and equitable access – which are exactly the indicators school boards rely on when making decisions

about instructional programs and how to spend taxpayer money.

When athletic administrators talk to their school board about education-based athletics, they are not asking the school board to fund competition – they are asking them to support a structured educational program. In the end, the question is not whether education-based athletics belong in an educational system. The question is whether schools are willing to lead them as educational programs. When schools do, interscholastic athletics does not compete with academics – athletics reinforces academics. That is the true educational return on the investment. **HST**

Resources:

Brookings Institute Study: *https://www.brookings.edu/articles/school-boards-should-focus-budget-deliberations-on-student-outcomes-financial-sustainability/?utm*

The Benefits of Scholastic Athletics *https://bfi.uchicago.edu/insights/the-benefits-of-scholastic-athletics/?utm*

Project Play *https://projectplay.org/youth-sports/facts/benefits?utm*

Project Play – School Sports Resources *https://projectplay.org/school-sports/?utm*

Benefits of Youth Sports: *https://odphp.health.gov/sites/default/files/ 2020-09/YSS_Report_OnePager_2020-08-31_web.pdf?utm*

Organized Sports for Children, Preadolescents, and Adolescents *https://ncys.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Organized-Sports-for-Youth_AAP-Clinical-Report.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com*

School Activity Programs Equally Important for Nation's Middle Schools *https://nfhs.org/stories/school-activity-programs-equally-important-for-nation-s-middle-schools?utm*

American Association of Adapted Sports Programs *https://adaptedsports.org/about-aaasp/?utm*

Organized Sports as a Pathway to Lifelong Health and Well-Being *https://obssr.od.nih.gov/news-and-events/news/directors-spotlight/organized-sports-as-a-pathway-to-lifelong-health-and-well-being?utm*

The Benefits of Scholastic Athletics *https://www.nber.org/papers/w34046?utm*

Sports Participation and Academic Performance: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health *https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272775710000506?utm*

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