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Special Issue

The numbers don't lie: Athletics strengthens student performance and doesn't even cost that much

Note from Scott Milder, Friends of Texas Public Schools President and CEO

Following an incredible conversation with Northside ISD's Athletic Director Stanley Laing, I asked permission to publish his report on expenditures versus results for student athletes versus non-athlete students in his school district outside San Antonio serving nearly 100,000 students. It is the fourth largest school district in Texas. Stanley sheds some light on the myth that we spend too much on athletics.

Whether it is the football coach's salary, the price of the turf in the stadium, or the new locker rooms included in the bond package, the cost of athletic programs in public schools has always been a contentious topic.

With Texas public school districts forced to slash budgets this year, even athletic programs were sent to the proverbial chopping block, putting coaches, parents, and student athletes on the defensive about the necessity of their programs. But just outside of San Antonio, Texas' fourth largest public school district Northside ISD, doesn't just claim their athletic program is making a difference in students' lives; they have the data to prove it.

"As a former high school principal I see the positive effects athletics makes on our students' lives both inside and outside of the classroom." said Stan Laing, NISD's Executive Director of Athletics. "We could take any group such as band, ROTC, spirit, etc. and see the same results -- kids that are connected outside the classroom are more successful academically."

In Northside ISD that adds up to a lot of students. Nearly 40% of students participate in athletics in 7-8th grade. Although the number drops at the high school level, athletics still reaches almost a quarter (23%) of the student population and with 15 high schools, the stakes to keep students interested, engaged, and achieving have never been higher.

So off the field, off the court, and away from the track, what kind of measurable differences does Northside see between student athletes and non-athletes?

Athletes show up.

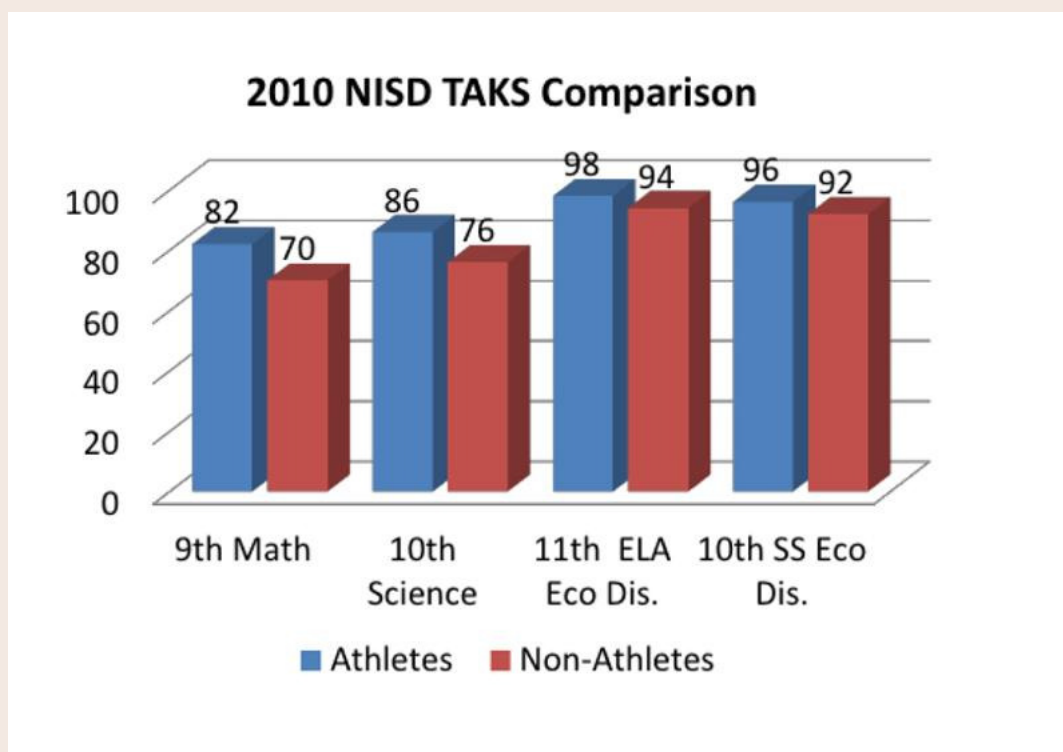
NISD attendance rates are 1.7% higher for athletes (95.1% vs. 93.7%). That may not sound like a lot, but since state funding dollars are tied to daily attendance rates, one additional percentage point can result in thousands of dollars of additional funding per day for a campus. Not to mention, students who are in class achieve at a higher rate.

Athletes graduate at a higher rate.

NISD student athletes graduated at an astounding rate of 97.1% vs. the non-athlete rate of 90.1%.

Athletes score higher on standardized tests.

Northside ISD administrators reviewed results for both student athletes and their non-athlete peers. The chart below compares scores for both groups in several subject and grade levels. Student athletes out-performed their non-athlete peers in every subject and grade-level on the 2010 TAKS test. This was especially true in the student group of students identified as economically disadvantaged (a sub-group used by the state for testing purposes).



Athletes have fewer discipline referrals.

The benefits of athletics aren't just academic. Following directions on the court or field seems to translate well into following directions in the classroom, because NISD student athletes are disciplined almost 10% less than their non-athlete peers (18.9% vs 28.4%). "We really see our program as a two prong approach," said Laing. "The first prong is interventions. Interventions are for the students that need more time to learn. Athletics

gives these students extra support and motivation to stay in school and not drop out. The poise, character, and self-discipline that is developed in athletics enhances successful student learning in the classroom." Laing went on to discuss the second prong, which he called enrichment. "This is for the students that already 'have it'. Athletics stretches these students to go above and beyond the commitment to excellence in the spirit of competition as well as academic success."

High costs of athletics is a myth

And while athletics are expensive, you may be surprised how small the overall investment actually is. Northside ISD's athletic budget makes up 1.47% of the overall general operating budget (\$3,410,237 in 2010-2011), and athletics is one of the only departments that generates money back into the budget. In NISD's case \$2,568,773.50 was returned to the general fund in 2010-2011.

Keep in mind, over 11,100 NISD students participate in athletics from grades 7-12. Of those, approximately 1,000 students participate in more than one sport. That translates into 45 teams at each high school and 28 teams at each middle school. Broken down farther and you get 505 coaches in NISD. But what many people fail to realize is that these coaches are also teaching a full load. They are math, science, English, special education, history, business, and even fine arts teachers. Coaches have a desire to see their students succeed on the field, but first and foremost they have a desire to see them succeed in the classroom.

Northside ISD isn't just producing champions inside the classroom and on the field, they are making sure they have the right people in place, continually studying the game plan, both on the field on Friday night, in the classroom Monday morning, and every day in between. They are keeping their students engaged and the results speak for themselves. In Northside ISD, a dollar spent on athletics is a dollar well spent indeed.

NOTE:

Although this is a Northside ISD case study, we at Friends of Texas Public Schools believe that very similar results are taking place in districts across the state. We encourage school leaders to pull their numbers on athletics and fine arts and share these truths with their communities. Northside ISD's data shows incredible results for the minimal investment they are making in athletics! E-mail smilder@fotps.org to share your story.

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