

THE ADVOCATE



Activity Connection

For students at Pojoaque Valley Middle School and High School, a combination of math and athletics provides the perfect mind and body workout.

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Making the Connection

Student Activities Improve School Climate and Promote a Spirit of Community

BY KATHLEEN WILSON SHRYOCK

The research supports a common-sense truth. When students find their school's climate to be supportive and stimulating, they are more likely to thrive: academic, social, and behavioral outcomes improve. Included in the research is Search Institute's extensive study of developmental assets. Many of the attributes defined by the institute as critical to healthy development—including student engagement, creative activities, and a caring school climate—are rooted in our schools. But with today's educators already juggling a full plate of responsibilities, the challenge to build a healthy school environment can seem daunting. Fortunately, student activities are an effective, efficient way to promote a positive climate by providing many of the assets that kids so desperately need.

Lyn Fiscus, student leadership development specialist and author of the *Adviser's Guide to Student Activities*, believes that activities enhance the climate of the school by giving students a place to belong. "Activities like clubs, sports, arts programs, career and technical student organizations, and so forth can provide connections for students by giving them their own niche where they feel welcome and enjoy spending time," she said. "In a broader sense, activities that provide school-wide programs give students an opportunity to participate in a shared experience and feel part of something bigger than themselves." Fiscus points to pep rallies, dances, and spirit-week competitions as just a few examples that allow students to work together toward a common goal, even if it's only to earn bragging rights for being the winning class.

Climate-enhancing activities are most impactful when they are integrated into the school rather than considered "extras" or distractions. Fiscus encourages educators to capitalize on →

The selection of a **school-wide theme** can spur student involvement, foster a cohesive climate, provide opportunities to integrate curriculum, and serve as the foundation for a year's worth of engaging activities.



Photo of Saluda Elementary students by Rodrigo Dorfman melloweb.com



“By using activities that are purposeful, we allow the students to connect with what they are learning and to demonstrate their knowledge in ways that work best for them. It’s not just a paper-and-pencil assessment. Everyone is all-in—working as a team to achieve their goals.”

—JOHNEKA WILLIAMS

This imaginative mosaic wall was created by a collaboration of children from Bugg Elementary School and student mentors from North Carolina colleges including NC State, St. Augustine College, and Shaw University.

the excitement surrounding popular activities by using them to engage students in classroom curricula. “During the planning stages of major (school-wide) activities, advisers could discuss with other faculty members ways that the upcoming activity could be incorporated into academics,” she said. For example, a canned food drive could be used as the foundation for encouraging language arts students to read articles about the homeless or for having math students count the collected items and then determine percentages and averages per class.

A Culture of Collaboration

At Bugg Creative Arts and Science Magnet Elementary School in Raleigh, NC, an integrative approach prescribed by the A+ Schools Program combines arts, activities, and academics to create an engaging school climate. Principal Johneka Williams explains that the staff uses collaborative activities to help students build important connections with the curriculum and their peers. “Children are gifted in many different ways. By using activities that are purposeful, we allow the students to connect with what they are learning and to demonstrate their knowledge in ways that work best for them,” said Williams. “It’s not just a paper-and-pencil assessment. Everyone is all-in—working as a team to achieve their goals.”

Kristen Terry, magnet coordinator and dean of academics at Bugg, has seen the power of arts integration at work with her math students. In one example, a classroom activity allowed a student with a reputation as a slow learner to demonstrate his unique abilities and become a leader. “Arts integration [through activities] levels the playing field,” said Terry. “It allows each student to use his or her own strengths rather than getting stuck with one label. It lets students see the strengths of their peers and empowers them to work together with confidence.”

Collaboration is at the heart of a regular team-building activity hosted by the student council at St. Agnes Academy in Houston, TX. For their Lunch with Leaders initiative, council members survey teachers for names of students who are not currently involved in activities. From this list, students are selected to attend a 50-minute luncheon where they are asked to provide input on current school-related issues. Council members serve as table captains and lead small-group discussions. Ideas are then presented to the larger group, which includes the principal and additional faculty members. Director of Student Activities Tommy Calais explains that the

regular lunch meetings have had a positive impact on school climate. “Some major changes have come from these cooperative meetings,” he said. “And the students are very aware that their voices are being heard. This has made a big difference.”

Community Outreach

At Bugg Elementary, educators use arts and activities as a foundation for engagement with the local community. Assistant Principal Ruth Ann Freeman explains that building bonds with local residents and area organizations strengthens the climate on campus. Every year, the school hosts an “artists-in-residence” program where local artisans demonstrate their crafts. Past guests have included experts in pottery making, quilting, drumming, jumping rope, and even a wire artist from Zimbabwe. The school also offers a “student university,” in which community members assist with after-school programs such as robotics, golf, LEGO construction, and entrepreneurship.

Additional networking has resulted in Bugg’s partnership with a local amphitheater where students are invited to display their talents in a yearly show. The event has evolved into a community-wide celebration that draws as many as 2,000 people. The school also works with universities to present an annual college-bound day. Students are mentored by local college students who share information about their experiences at the postsecondary level. “All of these events help to create a culture of community at our school,” said Freeman. “And by connecting kids with role models through the arts, activities, academics, and athletics, we are inspiring kids to think about the possibilities.”

At Saluda Elementary School, an A+ School in Saluda, NC, integrative activities provide a vehicle for parent participation. Instead of a traditional open house, the school hosts “informances” several times a year in which students display their work and share their talents with parents and members of the community. Principal Ronette Dill explains that in addition to promoting a positive climate, these events provide an authentic assessment of student learning. “Informances empower students. When they know that they will be responsible for demonstrating their learning, students are more focused and put forth their best efforts to ensure they understand the content,” she said. “Students are proud to share what they have learned and enjoy ‘teaching’ community members.”

And the large percentage of parents in attendance further reinforces the positive climate by validating the importance of the students and their school.

In addition to informances, displays of student artwork throughout the school, at the local post office, and in a public art show build a sense of community on campus and with the city as a whole. Saluda's visual arts teacher Susan McRostie integrates math, science, social studies, and language arts into innovative lessons that reinforce the curriculum. Because students know that their works will be displayed, they are engaged and take pride in their creations.

A Unifying Theme

The selection of a school-wide theme is another strategy that educators can use to foster a cohesive climate. Each summer, Saluda educators spend several days selecting a theme and brainstorming about ideas for a year's worth of supporting activities. "A school-wide theme allows all stakeholders—staff, students, parents, and community members—a chance to be involved throughout the year," said Dill. "During 2013–2014, the theme was Camp Saluda+. There are many summer camps in the area, but few of the students can afford to attend them." To remedy this, educators decided to bring camp to school. The theme was supported through classroom décor, the composition of a camp song, and integrative activities. Each Friday, all students wore special T-shirts to a "campfire" session where two classes would share what they had been learning with the rest of the student body. A favorite campfire performance was a student-driven play about the solar system, featuring costumes created by the students.

Educators at Bugg Elementary regularly use themes to promote a positive climate while integrating all areas of the curriculum. A recent rain forest project allowed fifth graders to study animals, use the media center for research, perform scientific investigations, and create artwork. At the end of the unit, parents were invited to attend a rain forest café in the school library to view student presentations. Principal Williams explains that the use of a theme combined with presentations "brings the education experience to life for the students and their parents."

At St. Agnes Academy, a school-wide theme announced at the start of the year is used to set the tone from day one. Student council members meet at the end of each year and select the next year's theme. This year, the school community is challenged to "Be Bold." The mission is carried out through initiatives by individual groups

within the school and also applied to school-wide service projects.

Fiscus agrees that the use of a theme can spur student interest and create school-wide connections. Using current events as the basis for a theme can be especially effective, because it's what people are talking about and interested in. "Rather than ignoring students' interest in something like the Super Bowl, why not engage them in a related activity like the 'Souper' Bowl of Caring, in which students collect canned goods to donate to a local shelter?" she said. "Use their excitement and interest to connect to a worthwhile activity."

Group activities that allow students to leave a legacy are especially helpful in creating a climate where students feel connected to their school. Bugg Elementary is housed in a facility that was built in 1964. The school has a long-standing reputation as a quality magnet program. One wall of the school is dedicated to displaying photos of former students who have now graduated from high school. Recently, students created a mosaic wall as a way to leave their imprint on a school rich in history. Magnet Coordinator Terry believes that projects like this create a culture of inclusion. "Students can come back years later, remember, and see a tangible representation of their time at our school," she said. "They can say, 'This is a part of me.'"

Dill believes that all schools, even those with limited budgets and time constraints, have the potential to improve school climate and increase student engagement when the faculty makes the time for collaborative planning. "When a student has the opportunity to learn about perimeter in math, run the perimeter of the gym in physical education class, and write a rap about perimeter in language arts, he or she is sure to leave school with a clear understanding of perimeter."

Integrative arts, activities, and athletics programs are a practical solution to increasing student engagement and providing key developmental assets that directly impact student outcomes. When parents and other community stakeholders are invited to participate, the benefits are even more far-reaching. The end result is a positive school climate that nurtures its students and provides them with the skills and confidence to succeed as ethical, responsible, and productive adults. ●

TO LEARN MORE about the positive effects of arts, athletics, and activities on school climate, watch this video from the Fresno (CA) Unified School District: [a4sa.org/FresnoUnified](https://www.a4sa.org/FresnoUnified).

SCHOOL CLIMATE RESOURCES



A+ SCHOOLS PROGRAM

This arts-based whole-school reform effort uses arts integration to impact school climate and create connections that make schools engaging, meaningful, and enjoyable places to teach and learn.



CHARACTER.ORG

This nonprofit organization works to ensure that today's young people are empowered to be ethical and engaged citizens. Their site offers tips for fostering a positive school environment.



EDUCATION WORLD

Review archives and articles from Education World to discover practical tips for building a positive climate at school.



NATIONAL SCHOOL CLIMATE CENTER

The goal of this organization is to promote positive and sustained school climates that nurture social and emotional, ethical, and academic skills. The center provides resources and research in this area.



DEVELOPMENTAL STUDIES CENTER

DSC is a nonprofit educational publisher dedicated to children's academic, ethical, and social development. This article written by Eric Shaps, PhD, outlines the importance of a healthy school environment in influencing student development.



SEARCH INSTITUTE'S 40 DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS

Search Institute has identified 40 building blocks of healthy development that help children grow up to be happy, healthy, contributing members of society.

[a4sa.org/resources](https://www.a4sa.org/resources)

Math + Athletics = Strength Training

Bob Koski is the head track-and-field coach, strength-and-conditioning teacher, and physical education instructor at Pojoaque Valley Middle School and Pojoaque Valley High School in Santa Fe, NM. In his nearly 20 years as an educator, Koski has learned that athletics can offer students more than physical fitness training. In addition to providing students with access to wellness and team-building pursuits, the athletic arena affords many opportunities to combine activities with academics. In this article, Koski talks about the benefits of this winning combination.



MY EXPERIENCE in this field has shown me the benefits of designing programs that help student athletes develop not only physically, but also mentally. I believe that personal improvement should be the measure of success, not necessarily the application of one standard that everyone needs to obtain. Students come to us at many different performance levels and from many different backgrounds. We have such a limited time with our students that it is difficult to measure continued improvement throughout the school year. By implementing a numbers-based system in both physical education and athletics, I am able to constantly show a student's progress weekly, monthly, and yearly.

In creating training programs, I use math to reinforce classroom concepts, allow students to establish goals, and monitor progress. To do this, I implement percentage-based workouts. Initially, each athlete performs a baseline fitness test, max out (upper limit), or time trial. From these initial numbers, I form training groups based on the students' current abilities. Each week, these groups run or lift weights based on a percentage of their testing maximums. The training cycle usually begins at 60 percent (of each group's max out). The percentage is increased by 5 to 10 percent each week until we reach the end of the four-week training cycle. At this time, another fitness test, max out, or time trial is performed.

With every workout, we calculate indicators that help the students and the coaches know whether the athletes are progressing at the appropriate rate. Monthly goals are set so that students can strive for improvements. This is also how fitness grades are calculated. During the week, I manipulate many variables, including total volume (amount of exercise), recovery time, intensity, exercise order, and exercise variety. Involving the students in this process and posting performance lists, event records, and goals, help the student athletes stay motivated and provide them with the information they need to reach their personal best. Our track-and-field team's goal each season is for every student and our team as a whole to reach peak performance at the state meet in the spring. By calculating the right combination of intensity and volume, we can personalize the training routines of our athletes so that performance goals can be reached.

In addition to helping athletes with their physical training, the calculation of formulas, ratios, and percentages demonstrates to my students just how much we use math on a daily basis in a variety of areas. Athletics and physical education should not be a place of mindless activity, nor should they be treated as recess. I want to show my students that our program is a combination of math, science, and physical training and that these skills can be practiced every day. I am constantly asking my students to solve workout-based equations so that they know the exact time they need to run, how much recovery time they need, or how much weight they should be lifting. Each day, our students are learning to train their brains as well as their bodies. ●

An Administrator's Guide to Creating a Culture of Inclusion

WHEN IT COMES TO

creating a culture of student engagement, principals are charged with an immense responsibility. And while academics are often the focus of attention, many administrators are discovering that academics alone are not enough to help their schools—and their students—attain the desired results. Instead, the most successful schools are overseen by administrators who understand that quality academics and a vibrant student activities program go hand in hand.

Paul Branagan is the state director for the Massachusetts Association of Student Councils. He is also the principal and student council adviser at Middleborough High School in Middleborough, MA. His unique combination of roles provides important insight regarding the necessity of activities programs. “The administrator is not only required to be the instructional leader over what happens academically in the classroom, but he or she is also charged with making sure the overall culture of the school is enhancing classroom work,” he said. “It is essential that administrators understand the link between academics and activities [including arts and athletics]. When administrators put time and energy into student programs and hold everyone accountable for bringing these programs to life, it allows for the creation of healthy partnerships. It evolves a culture where all students have an entry point into high school involvement, and everyone is equally celebrated.”

So how can administrators establish a cohesive, inclusive climate in their schools? One way is by ensuring that school activities programs adequately represent the interests and ideals of all students. Branagan describes several initiatives that allow him to take the pulse of the school by giving students at all levels a chance to be heard.

Each month, Branagan hosts a Round Table discussion that includes a student leader from every club, organization, and athletic team within the school. The meeting follows a formal agenda and



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Hometown Heroes: School-wide Projects Build a Caring Community

AT KLEIN OAK HIGH SCHOOL in Spring, TX, it is an annual tradition for student council members to raise money for a selected “homecoming” charity. Conventional fundraisers and ticket sales have generated a respectable \$6,000 each year. But during the 2013–2014 school year, the Klein Oak council took their fundraising aspirations to astonishing new heights. Through a simple but effective campaign that relied on community connections, the power of social media, and a heartfelt desire to make a difference, students raised \$80,000 for their chosen beneficiary.

Student council adviser Susan Parent explains that council members begin each year with a brainstorming session aimed at choosing a charity. In 2013, the cause was clear. Students were unified in their desire to raise money for Captain Bill Dowling, a Klein Oak alum who had been severely injured while battling a blaze that claimed the lives of four of his fellow firefighters. While their cause was well-defined, students determined that traditional fundraising methods that focused on the council would fall short of their goals, so they decided to try something new. Proceeds from ticket sales and the traditional homecoming carnival would still be gathered, but a new campaign would invite the efforts of a collective community. The council asked other clubs and organizations within their school to participate, and they reached out to local businesses and neighboring feeder schools. Soon, connections with community members were resulting in significant donations, and businesses were offering complimentary services to further support the campaign.

“We created ‘Iron Bill’ T-shirts [to be sold as a fundraiser] and stated that anyone who donated at least \$100 toward the cause would be listed as a donor on the back of the shirt,” said Parent. “We contacted our feeder schools with the same offer. I also posted the T-shirt image on social media. With the help of Facebook and Twitter, we were able to reach people



not only in our community, but from the rest of Texas and other states as well.” She noted that the presentation of an \$80,000 check to Dowling’s family during the school’s homecoming game was an empowering moment in the lives of council members and the student body as a whole.

Council members took to heart the lessons learned during the 2013–2014 campaign. While the student council still plays a key role in organization and planning, the council’s 2014–2015 service project invites everyone

at the school to participate, including students who aren’t normally involved in extra activities. In “The House that Oak Built,” students hope to fully fund and build a house for Habitat for Humanity. To date, students have raised \$45,000 of their \$60,000 goal, and they are also participating in the actual labor. As with the “Iron Bill” campaign, students are asking for the support of feeder schools and community members. And every Saturday, a different school-based group goes to the building site to participate in the work.

Parent explains that the implementation of a common school-wide service project has had a significant impact on the school’s overall atmosphere. “Last year, the climate of Klein Oak completely changed. The students were spirited and excited about school,” she said. “Students learned the importance of service by immersing themselves in helping others. When my students chose to help Captain Dowling, a passion ignited within them. They truly wanted to help—not because it looked good on a college application, but because they knew they were needed. It is exciting to hear from community members [who have now worked with our students] about how great our students are and how they are so involved in giving back.” ●

TO WATCH a video about Klein Oak’s “Iron Bill” campaign, go to a4sa.org/KleinOak.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KLEIN OAK HIGH SCHOOL



Members of the Klein Oak student council honored Captain Bill Dowling for his service to the community.



This year, Klein Oak students are building a house for a local family in need of assistance.

provides students with an opportunity to discuss important issues with their principal. "Between meetings, each student is challenged not only to lead his or her group but also to listen to what his or her peers are saying," said Branagan. "This encourages students to become more global in their views." Members are also invited to collaborate with other Round Table participants to organize a school-wide program.

While the Round Table includes students who are already engaged in activities, the Forum is a monthly town hall meeting that is open to all students, but specifically targets those who are unable to connect through activities because of job commitments or other reasons. Branagan got the idea for the Forum after asking several disconnected students to serve on an advisory committee. He discovered that the students had a lot to say not only about what was happening at their school, but also about what was missing. "Experiences like the Forum are enlightening. You are talking with kids who may not show up at the dance or the battle of the bands but who have really great input into how to shape a school." The Forum also allows student activities programs to learn about the students that are not being reached by their programs.

Branagan also recommends connecting with smaller populations. For example, he recently took the time to brainstorm with a small group of students who wanted to start a club for women's studies. And he encourages faculty advisers to work with their student leaders to develop an annual statement regarding their group's accomplishments and visions for the future.

"If administrators don't recognize activities, they are missing opportunities to ensure that students know they matter," said Branagan. "As an administrator, your face might always be at the big events like the game or the dance, but by also taking the time to make students feel heard and ensuring that the school offers something for everyone, you can create a culture that encompasses the entire student body."

This resource guide from Edutopia was prepared with principals and other school administrators in mind. Follow this link for advice about effective leadership strategies, collaborating with teachers, and cultivating and retaining strong leaders: a4sa.org/EdutopiaAdmins.

the sky's the limit

Competitions can be a great way to combine curricula with student activities. Competitive events that focus on academics challenge talented students to learn more about their favorite subjects and provide opportunities for collaboration with peers who share similar interests.

- DESTINATION IMAGINATION** idodi.org
- INDIANA ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS ACADEMIC COMPETITIONS** iasp.org/dsp/academic
- ODYSSEY OF THE MIND** odysseyofthemind.com
- UNITED STATES ACADEMIC DECATHLON** usad.org
- SCIENCE OLYMPIAD** soinc.org
- VERIZON INNOVATIVE APP CHALLENGE** appchallenge.tsaweb.org
- INTEL INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE & ENGINEERING FAIR** a4sa.org/sciencefair

Duke University Talent Identification Program Educational Opportunity Guide
A comprehensive guide to academic competitions in the United States. a4sa.org/academiccompetitions

Science Olympiad
soinc.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.

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

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