



NATIONAL
DROPOUT
PREVENTION
CENTER

NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 27 NUMBER 1

AFTER-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

THE ORIGIN FOR THIS NEWSLETTER'S THEME BEGAN WITH THE KEYNOTE ADDRESSES DELIVERED AT THE AT-RISK YOUTH NATIONAL FORUM IN MYRTLE BEACH, SC, IN FEBRUARY 2017. DABO SWINNEY, HEAD FOOTBALL COACH AT CLEMSON UNIVERSITY; GARY GILMORE, HEAD BASEBALL COACH AT COASTAL CAROLINA UNIVERSITY, WHO BOTH COACHED THEIR TEAMS TO NATIONAL TITLES IN THEIR RESPECTIVE SPORTS; AND TARA BROWN, AN EDUCATOR AND SPEAKER KNOWN AS THE CONNECTIONS COACH, CHALLENGED CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS TO GET STUDENTS INVOLVED IN AS MANY ACTIVITIES AS POSSIBLE. SPORTS IS ONE OF A NUMBER OF WAYS TO DO THIS. ATTENDEES AT THE CONFERENCE TOOK THE CHALLENGE TO HEART AND A NEWSLETTER DEVOTED TO THE VALUE OF STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AS A DROPOUT PREVENTION STRATEGY RESULTED.



Involvement in extracurricular activities is an excellent predictor of adult success. Involvement of all sorts (sports, clubs, extracurricular, band, choir, drama guild, after-school programs, and the like) gives students connections to activities that interest them with like-minded students and the adults who guide them.

Involvement contributes to academic success. This is seen often with many high school students. For example, the graduation rates for students in marching band, choir, cheer squads, and academic-related clubs are about 100%. Also, students enrolled in career-technical education (CTE) programs participate in career-related youth organizations such as DECA, SkillsUSA, Business Professionals of America, and others. Typically, CTE students have higher graduation rates than the schoolwide student population.

Involvement is good logic for keeping students in school as it supports academic achievement. Attendance, self-discipline, study skills, and behavior all improve as students are more involved. Involvement also helps with socialization and soft skill development for students, both highly prized in the workforce.

Research indicates that athletes' perceptions of a caring climate are linked to their emotional regulation. Many students, and particularly those who are at risk of

dropping out of school, may also find it difficult to keep their negative emotions in check and to express joy when good things happen, but those who are also in positive sports environments indicate they are better able to regulate their emotions. Acquiring this skill could enhance the school experience for many students.

However, for students in at-risk situations, participation in clubs, academic honor societies, and extracurricular activities is almost nonexistent as these students are reluctant to join clubs and participate in extracurricular activities. As such, it is unlikely an at-risk student will be involved in the typical academic and social experiences high school offers other students. In some respects, this involvement may be more critical for students at risk than those who are on target academically, athletically, and socially.

In many cases sports is a primary (or perhaps the only) avenue of involvement for students at risk. Many coaches, players, parents, and others testify that the student's academic performance, attendance, and behavior all improve during a player's season. Some students are encouraged to play a sport each season to keep them focused and on track academically. For them, sports may be the only avenue that provides benefits other students enjoy. In particular, this is important for boys as

they have higher at-risk and dropout rates. With up to 25% (higher in some areas) of our young people dropping out of high school, it may be time to encourage even wider involvement in sports and other activities for youth at risk.

In response to the need to better understand this relationship, we have assembled an outstanding group of contributors for this newsletter. These contributors live this topic daily. We have two at-risk intervention program profiles coming to us from Ohio and Maryland. A book review of the impact of academic support for professional football player Michael Oher is included. Also, a research overview written by Dr. Mary Fry from the University of Kansas provides insight on current and emerging research. A policy authority on sports and society, Dr. Jay Coakley, emeritus professor from the University of Colorado, addresses important policy implications on this subject. And, to conclude our newsletter, Jim Thompson, Founder and CEO of Positive Coaching Alliance, and Marty Mordarski, Executive Director of Positive Coaching Alliance, share their views on "better athletes—better people."

-Patrick J. O'Connor, EdD
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Participating in a Positive Sport Climate Reaps Many Benefits for Young People

by Mary D. Fry

Sport participation is an important activity that can help students remain engaged in school. Based on Achievement Goal Perspective Theory (Nicholls, 1989), researchers in sport psychology have over the last 20 years zeroed in on the features of the sport climate that lead to positive outcomes. These features create what is referred to as a caring and task-involving climate where coaches value and recognize each athlete's personal effort and improvement, foster cooperation among teammates, and help athletes understand that mistakes are part of the sport experience and should be viewed as opportunities to learn. In addition, in this climate athletes feel welcome and know that everyone involved on the team will be treated with kindness and respect.

When athletes perceive this caring and task-involving climate they reap benefits on three fronts: (a) their immediate sport experience is better, (b) they develop and report greater psychological skills and well-being, and (c) they experience greater interest and support in academic outcomes. The body of research is compelling in highlighting the merit of a positive sport climate. See Fry & Moore (in press) and Harwood, Keegan, Smith, & Raine (2015) for reviews of this research.



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With regard to the immediate sport experience, when athletes perceive a caring and task-involving climate on their teams, they have more fun; try harder; display greater sportsmanship (e.g., honor the game); report greater commitment towards their team and sport; and want to keep playing the sport in the future. They also experience less anxiety, shame, and burn-out within their sport engagement. These outcomes alone are huge in shaping a positive sport experience where all athletes, regardless of performance or ability level, can thrive.

In addition to the direct benefits of participating on caring and task-involving teams, research is exciting that links a positive team culture to psychological skills and well-being. Athletes who perceive a caring and task-involving climate on their teams report greater hope and happiness (and less depression and sadness), empathy, mental skills, and mindful engagement within their sport. One of my favorite research findings is that athletes' perceptions of a caring climate are linked to their emotional regulation. It is hard for many students to keep their negative emotions in check (not to catastrophize negative events) and to express joy when good things happen, but those in positive sport environments indicate they are better able to regulate their emotions. Acquiring this skill could enhance the school experience for many students (Fry et al., 2012).

One final benefit coming from recent research is that students who perceive a caring and task-involving climate are more focused on their academic pursuits. Poux and Fry (2015) found that Division I athletes are more engaged in exploring their careers after sport when in a caring and task-involving sport climate, and interestingly, report higher athletic identity. These findings were recently replicated, and high school students perceiving a caring and

task-involving climate reported greater exploration and engagement in their future career preparation and higher academic identity. They also perceived greater support for their academics from teammates and coaches (Chamberlin & Fry, 2017).

Together, the positive outcomes described above paint a vivid picture of how a caring and task-involving climate can set athletes up to thrive in sports and in school. If sport programs can emphasize the features of a caring and task-involving climate, and schools can follow suit, students are certain to be immersed in their school life.

-Mary D. Fry, PhD

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A caring and task-involving climate is one where athletes perceive that the coach

- values and rewards effort and improvement,
- fosters cooperation with teammates,
- emphasizes that mistakes are part of learning, and
- insures that every athlete is treated with kindness and respect.

Meet Our Guest Editor

■ Dr. Patrick J. O'Connor received his EdD from Virginia Polytechnic Institute State University and has been teaching at Kent State University in Ohio for over 30 years, focusing on coordinating teacher education programming and leadership for the career-technical education community, preparing teachers for initial licenses, and facilitating ongoing professional development. In addition to his university teaching experience, Dr. O'Connor has taught at the high school and community college levels. As an associate professor in the School of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum Studies at Kent State, his primary teaching duties are at the master's degree level. His research interests include professional development of career and technical education teachers, curriculum studies, workforce/economic development, workplace literacy, and leadership/organizational change.



NDPC Offers Position Papers

■ NDPC/N has released four position papers examining trends and findings regarding improving high school graduation rates. Topics examined in the position papers include an examination of trauma's role in inhibiting student success; laws related to and supporting strategies for immigrant students and families; the role of Career and Technical Education (CTE) in dropout prevention; and utilizing the arts as a dropout prevention strategy. The position papers are available at www.dropoutprevention.org/resources/research-reports/

NDPC Online Courses Available

■ NDPC offers online courses on the *15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention*. Courses are self-paced, interactive, independent, and available to be completed individually or combined with conference attendance as part of NDPC's National Dropout Prevention Specialist certification requirements. Courses may be used for CEU credits, pending your district's requirements. For more information, course descriptions, FAQs, and to register go to www.dropoutprevention.org/shop



NDPN Recognizes Certificate Completers

■ The NDPN recognized four additional completers of the National Dropout Prevention Specialist (NDPS) certification program at the National Dropout Prevention Network National Conference in Palm Springs, CA, in October. Pictured above are (l to r) Shawneen Matask, Kathleen Chronister, Renee Townsend, and Denise Hoy. Congratulations to these completers!

The NDPS certification program is founded on NDPC's research-based effective strategies, known youth risk factors, professional learning participation, and field implementation of acquired knowledge. This certification verifies and strengthens dropout prevention experience and expertise and facilitates networking with others equally dedicated to dropout prevention. Go to www.dropoutprevention.org/services-certifications/national-dropout-prevention-specialist-certification-program/ for more information or contact us at ndpc@dropoutprevention.org with any questions or to register for the program.

Upcoming *Solutions to the Dropout Crisis*

■ Join *Solutions to the Dropout Crisis* webcast on the second Tuesday of every month from 3:30 to 4:30 PM (ET) to hear experts in the field of dropout prevention discuss successful dropout prevention initiatives. *Solutions* is available for viewing free at www.dropoutprevention.org/webcast. Archived sessions are always available for viewing.



Tapping Students' Potential

by Dave Browne

Dave Browne understands the importance of having positive role models in his life because he struggled in high school academically. Fortunately, he had coaches and teachers who did as much as they could to help guide him through the difficult years of being a teenager. Additionally, as a three-sport athlete, Dave was able to stay connected to coaches who paved the way to where he is today. Today, and for the past 17 years, Dave Browne has served as director and teacher for the Twinsburg Alternative Program (TAP) in Twinsburg, OH, doing for others through TAP what made the difference in his own life.

The TAP program provides both short-term and long-term interventions for students who are at risk of not graduating with their senior class. The short-term intervention is designed to provide strong support and clear expectations in an environment that will then transfer easily to Twinsburg's comprehensive high school. The emphasis during short-term intervention is on academic and behavioral assessment support and the student's transition back into the regular classroom. The long-term intervention is designed to build new skills for the students who have complex academic and behavioral problems. New skills, such as anger management, problem solving, academic organizational skills, computer skills, and self-monitoring, are taught in an environment which supports academic learning. These skills lead to greater confidence and self-esteem on the part of the students. Whether the intervention is short term or long term, TAP provides students with the academic, behavioral, and social supports that may have been missing in their life to date.

Program Overview

The TAP program is located in a separate facility directly across the street from Twinsburg High School. The building is equipped with 15 computers, keeping the class sizes small and allowing staff the ability to work with the students in smaller numbers. The TAP facility itself has a refrigerator, microwave, and a convection

oven for the student's convenience. Breakfast and lunch are provided by the high school food service department for those who qualify for federal assistance. As an extra gesture, Mr. Browne also provides healthy snacks on his own accord for the students.

TAP uses an online curriculum called APEX which is aligned to the Ohio state standards. TAP's regular education staff encompasses all departments and curriculum areas from Twinsburg High School so that the students at TAP benefit from having certified teachers who are assigned to TAP daily for a 90-min block period. These teachers provide support in the four core subject areas. In addition to the TAP regular education staff, there are also Special Education Intervention Specialists at TAP who are assigned to assist and support students daily who are on IEPs and 504 educational plans. The small class sizes and the attention to individual student's needs are two hallmarks of the successful program.

Program Strategies and Outcomes

Twinsburg is a progressive community with a growing school population. In the last few years, the number of at-risk students in the alternative program has increased and the services provided to each alternative student has increased also. Students at TAP have a disconnect from the traditional classroom setting. However, there are at least 40% of the students who simply lack the discipline or structure during the early years at Twinsburg High School for continued success. As a result, these students become credit deficient. Fortunately, with the support of a very dedicated guidance team, these students are identified by the end of the previous school year. The team collaborates with Mr. Browne at the end of the school year regarding the roster of students who will



become a part of TAP for the next school year.

The Twinsburg district recognized a spike in the number of students who required social work assistance and, in the 2016-2017 school year, the district hired a team of licensed social workers. TAP was able to benefit from having a social worker to work with students twice a week, both individually and in group settings. The results were amazing. The social worker was able to assist/encourage students with organized activities outside of school.

One program, Teen Institute, had at least 10 students as members. In this program, students learned about a motivational interviewing approach aimed at the goal of driving an individual's motivation to positively change through goal-setting skills and stress-management skills. Additionally, with Mr. Browne's assistance, students began to get involved with extracurricular sports and the high school band, fostering a sense of belonging and a school community. The results were amazing as well. Students began to take accountability for their academics as well as ownership in their specific sport or activity. The result was a more focused student who may have months ago had little interest in staying focused on the here and now. Through TAP, those same students realized not only their present academic success, but their own future personal success as well.

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When Are School Sports an Effective Dropout Prevention Tool?

by Jay Coakley

All of us have heard widely accepted statements about the positive impact of sport participation on young people: It builds character, confidence, fortitude, discipline, achievement orientation, good study habits, a commitment to school, teamwork, respect for authority, relationships with peers, lifelong involvement in health-producing physical activities, and gratitude toward those who have provided guidance and support, among other life-affirming qualities. The rhetoric used by elite athletes includes references to these things as they talk about sports in their lives, and coaches often claim that they are teachers of these things. As a result, many believe that being an athlete and a school dropout are mutually exclusive.

This is unfortunate because it has discouraged us from identifying the specific conditions under which various outcomes, including dropout prevention, are most likely to occur in connection with sport participation. Fortunately, there is a growing body of research that helps us understand that outcomes depend on the social backgrounds and support systems of young athletes. We now know that the impact of participation varies with the meanings that athletes give to their sport experiences and the ways that they integrate those meanings into their everyday lives. For example, the meaning and implications of sport participation may be quite different for an upper middle-class White high school girl who is captain of her highly successful lacrosse team and a first-generation Latino student who is a third-string tackle on a football team with a long record of embarrassing losses.

Overall, research shows that meaning and impact varies by school context and with the gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, and (dis)ability of participants. In other words, all sport participation is not the same, nor is it a magic antidote that automatically reduces school dropout. However, it is a context in which students develop relationships that promote identification with the school they attend. For example, we know that dropping out is less likely when students form relationships with peers and adults that enable them to construct their identities in

positive, confident, and affirming terms. When those peers have favorable attitudes toward school, and those adults have the resources and willingness to be their advocates and provide guidance, the likelihood of dropping out decreases further.

The challenge for those of us who want sports to produce positive outcomes is to develop and implement explicit strategies that effectively foster positive and supportive relationships among teammates and link those relationships to school-based activities that go beyond sport participation. Too often, coaches, teachers, and parents assume that practices and games create positive and supportive relationships among players, facilitate identification with school, and increase commitment to education. As a result, they often have no explicit strategies to maximize the chances that these things will occur, nor do they do evaluations to measure these outcomes. Classroom teachers would never get away with this approach!

At this point, we lack research that identifies the existence and nature of relationships among teammates and how those relationships might increase identification with school and education. This is unfortunate because we do know that some young people form relationships with teammates that devalue school and focus their attention exclusively on sports as a basis for status and identity. Information on how to disrupt and refocus those relationships so that education is valued beyond maintaining academic eligibility is currently based on the hunches of adults here and there.

The second major challenge is to create strategies that connect young people with adult advocates who will assist them in identifying opportunities and making life affirming choices. Of course, there are students who already have family-based social networks that support a balance between



their commitments to education and sports and supply the resources to sustain that balance. Dropout prevention is not usually an issue for these students. However, when student athletes lack support and resources, there is a need for strategies that put them and their families in touch with adults who can provide educational and other forms of guidance and support that may not be readily available through school-based programs. After all, dropouts often occur due to factors outside school and sports.

In light of this, members of parent groups, booster organizations, and community service organizations should be given orientations to make them aware of how they can help in providing informed support and resources. Orientations should be presented by a trained faculty mentor who would outline how to provide young people the guidance they need to improve their learning and personal development and maintain a balanced commitment to sports and education.

When young people can participate in school activities that make them feel that they are being taken seriously as human beings, they are less likely to drop out. If sports serve as a context in which this occurs, it is a valuable dropout prevention tool.

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Coaching Success at Home, in School, and in the Community

by Rick Johnson

Rick Johnson, Student Intervention Specialist for Washington County Public School District in Hagerstown, MD, has a unique “program” for students who are identified as at risk. Rick is one of 20 student intervention specialists in the county who support students in grades 6-12 who are at risk. The students are identified based on attendance, behavior, grades, and credit status. The main goal is to increase the student’s involvement in school activities to improve academic performance and complete high school.

Rick is also the school’s head football coach and uses the same coaching principles to motivate at-risk students in class as on the field. He finds that instilling discipline, team building, cooperation, and goal setting work just as well off the field as on it. In addition, he supports a student’s academic success by monitoring attendance, conducting home visits, and arranging for tutoring and access to other school resources to support remediation when necessary. Rick travels to three high schools in the district and Coach Rick, as he is known to most, typically works with about 30 students in each school for a total of over 100 each year. Some of the students are also on his football team.

The program is comprehensive in that it encourages students to participate in as many activities as possible. The at-risk students typically have shied away from participating in extracurricular activities and clubs. Coach Rick assists students in finding ways to be more active in school and the community.

Getting students involved in at least one activity is the starting point. Coach Rick sees students start out with one activity and as they mature they get involved in others. The more activities students are involved in, the better off they are. For many students at risk, sports may be the only school activity they will pursue. While sports may provide the initial motivation, that initial motivation can extend to other school, home, and community activities.



The Approach

The basic approach Coach Rick follows is to build the strongest possible relationship with the student. This includes their school, home, and community lives. The foundation is to build trust with students who have struggled in school, at home, and in the community. Some of the students he works with struggle with trust because adults in their lives have let them down in the past. His rationale is all three aspects of the students’ lives contribute to their academic success, which in turn helps them with graduation. He has created a point system that rewards positive behaviors and motivates students to succeed in and out of school.

The system awards students points for positive performance at school, at home, and in their community. Students receive gift cards from local merchants as rewards for earning points. At school, students earn points for good attendance, athletic success, participation in clubs, improving grades, good study habits, and success on class projects and tests. For example an “A” letter grade earns five points and a “B” earns three. Coach Rick encourages other coaches and teachers to keep him informed of student progress and recommend points

for them. Students can earn up to 150 points for certain school activities.

Students in the district are expected to complete 75 service-learning hours by the time they graduate. Points are awarded for activities at home and in the community. To encourage family involvement, students earn points when their parents get involved in a booster club (50 points) or assist at fund-raising events. Parental involvement for the at-risk student is especially important because many of the parents (like their students) have not been fully engaged in the school experience. The district also sponsors youth summer camps and students earn points for helping out at the camps.

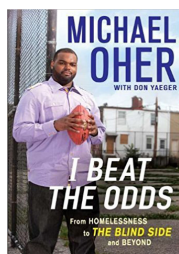
The Impact

It is widely accepted that involvement in school activities increases academic and overall school performance. Rick Johnson sees this daily. Attendance, study habits, and grades are definitely better. And, as on the practice field, students have to be present to get practice and instruction. Improving attendance may be the first step to improving academic success. Parents, academic teachers, and school administrators all testify to the improved performance in the students.

Another benefit from the program is that students help and push each other to better their grades and attendance. Promoting positive peer interactions and developing social skills is a big factor for the student who is at risk. A positive attitude is critical to success in everything. And the simple fact that they have someone who truly cares about them and believes in them is motivating. In the 2016-17 school year only two of Coach Rick’s students dropped out of school.

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BOOK REVIEW



I Beat the Odds: From Homelessness, to The Blind Side, and Beyond. (2011). Michael Oher with Don Yeager. Penguin Group, NY. [ISBN: 978-1-59240-612-8 (hardcover); ISBN: 978-1-59240-638-8 (paperback)]

This book should be read by everyone who has a role in guiding young people in our society—coaches, teachers, counselors, clergy, judges, police officers, parents, school board members, parole officers, government leaders, and anyone else charged with the well-being of youth. “Just because the statistics say we’re likely to fail doesn’t mean it has to be true for us.” “I was trying to get somewhere better than where I was.”

The above quotes are taken directly from *I Beat the Odds* by Michael Oher. Many people are familiar with Oher’s story from the book itself and from the movie, *The Blind Side*. They both chronicled his story of moving from a Memphis ghetto to football success at the University of Mississippi and eventually to the National Football League.

The book and movie were wildly successful as the “rags to riches” story touched a nerve with millions. *I Beat the Odds*, however, is a much more powerful story as it provides striking insight into a world that most people have never experienced. This world is one that many people would prefer to ignore (or pretend doesn’t exist) mainly because it is a world of failure. Failure is a hard pill for most Americans to swallow. But not for Michael Oher because he refused to let others decide for him who he was and what he could become.

Oher’s book describes in heartwarming, honest detail the people and experiences that led to his incredible journey. A constant theme throughout the book is the importance of his academic improvement. He had an uphill battle when he entered the ninth grade as he was woefully behind. Up to this time, he had been in numerous schools as his family moved around a lot. He had been in so many schools by age 14 it was difficult to assemble his school records.

His reading level was low, his study skills were almost nonexistent, and he was behind in all his classes. He would first have to catch up to where he should have been and then keep up with grade level course expectations. He (and those around him) would have to work twice as hard since he had never been in a caring classroom long enough to learn how to succeed academically.

He, his family, and his school all worked together to improve his academic performance. Support came from teachers, the Touhy family, the school educational support system, and the tireless efforts of a tutor, Miss Sue, who continued to tutor him (and other athletes) at the University of Mississippi. The school support system was designed to provide remedial assistance for the individual needs of the student. Also, one of the children in his adopted family was in the same high school and she studied with him. Oher also took online classes in summer to catch up on his credits.

His teachers were also supportive, making adaptations to fit his learning style. They realized he knew the material but had a difficult time expressing it in writing so they modified tests for him. The teachers also learned that sometimes they would have to explain things a second time or in a different fashion before he could learn it.

A main motivator for him was being involved in sports. He could have been an “honor student” at studying sports. He excelled at basketball (his first love), at football, and he ran track, keeping him involved year round. Sports was a vehicle to keep him motivated, busy, and around other focused students. And, he had coaches who pushed and supported him at the same time.

He knew that academics would enable him to play sports but he also knew a good education would last a lot longer than a sports season. As such, he worked hard setting a pace that others followed. They believed in him and the harder he worked

the more they wanted to support him. All of these trusting relationships led to his belief in himself. This was the recipe for success for Michael Oher. It seems everyone around him had bought into a statement from his book:

“Each good choice you make is an investment in your future.”

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RESOURCES

The *Wallace Foundation* works nationally to improve learning and enrichment for disadvantaged children and foster the vitality of the arts for everyone.

www.wallacefoundation.org

Afterschool Alliance is dedicated to raising awareness of the importance of afterschool programs and advocating for more afterschool investments.

www.afterschoolalliance.org

The *National Summer Learning Association* (NSLA) focuses on summer learning to help close the achievement gap.

www.summerlearning.org

Positive Coaching Alliance provides resources for youth and high school sports coaches, parents, administrators and students to encourage a positive, character-building experience.

www.positivecoach.org

EVENTS

March 18-21, 2018 Atlanta, GA
National Afterschool Association Annual
Convention Conference—*Lead the Charge*
www.naaweb.org/convention

May 1-4, 2018 Palm Springs, CA
Best Out-of-School Time Conference (BOOST)
www.boostconference.org/

June 20-23, 2018 Atlanta, GA
At-Risk & Struggling Students Conference
www.atriskstudentsconference.com

November 12-14, 2018 Kansas City, KS
National Summer Learning Association
Annual Conference
www.summerlearning.org



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VIEWPOINT

When you ask Ann Murphy about the boys she coaches through her nonprofit Youth R.I.S.E. (Resilience, Influence, Support, Education) program, she doesn't recite her win-loss records or all the on-the-field accomplishments and accolades her teams have received.

We had 18 kids graduate high school last year, and 12 went on to college. This year I have five kids committed to college on full scholarships and we're still working on two more seniors right now.

This was Murphy's response after we at Positive Coaching Alliance honored her as a national Double-Goal Coach® Award Winner in 2017, an award recognizing coaches who exemplify the ideals of striving to win and the more important goal of teaching life lessons through sports.

A child's involvement in a positive activity with the support of caring adults can have a significant impact on the probability that he or she remains committed to the activity itself and to doing whatever it takes to stay involved in that activity. Within the context

of school-based programs or under the care and watchful eye of coaches like Ann Murphy, that means doing things like showing up to class, completing assignments, and working toward improving academic performance.

Youth and high school sports provide an unparalleled opportunity to learn valuable life lessons and character traits like resilience, discipline, teamwork, commitment, empathy, and a teachable spirit. However, for those lessons to be effectively absorbed and practiced—and to influence kids to want to keep participating in sports—some key traits must be present for kids to have a truly positive, character-building experience.

Kids need to feel connected to coaches and to teammates. They need to believe they can improve and to feel confident that their coaches and teammates believe the same. They need to feel pride in acting with integrity and recognizing that they are part of something bigger than themselves.

The same holds true for Ann Murphy and her kids. Her success as a coach is driven by her commitment to providing a

safe, supportive, challenging environment where players learn about their capabilities, capacity to support each other, and recognize they are part of a larger community of teammates and student-athletes who can make a positive impact on the soccer field and in the classroom despite whatever obstacles may be standing in their way.

Coaches like Ann Murphy inspire us. They remind us of the potential power of youth and high school sports to not only keep more kids in positive activities and out of trouble—but the potential to help keep more kids in school, more involved in their communities, and more engaged as citizens and leaders in the future.

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