

# Cutting Activity Programs Only Hurts Students

BY PAULA FISHER

Throughout the nation, school districts are experiencing budget shortfalls. Invariably, they must find ways to slash programs and trim expenses or face unpopular tax increases. As education leaders examine potential cuts, one inclination is to focus on extracurricular activity programs, especially in the areas of academics and the fine arts. Although an easy choice, such a decision only hurts students.

During the 1990s, extensive research concluded that participation in high school activity programs directly related to a student's success in school. In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics released a report in June 1995, stating, "... it is clear that participation and success are strongly associated as evidenced by participants' better attendance, higher levels of achievement and aspirations to higher levels of education."

sap, working for the College Entrance Examination Board, released their conclusions. "Our study provides compelling evidence from the SAT, a national high-stakes test, that participation in extracurricular activities provides all students – including students from disadvantaged backgrounds, minorities and those with otherwise less-than-distinguished academic achievements in high school – a measurable and meaningful gain in their college admissions test scores." Involvement in activities appears to be one crucial way to develop the reasoning and higher-level thinking skills measured by tests like the SAT.

In an eight-year longitudinal study in 2003, Joseph Mahoney, Yale University, and Beverley Cairns and Thomas Farmer, University of North Carolina, reported, "There was a significant reciprocal association between consistent extracurricular activity participation

"Involvement in activities appears to be one crucial way to develop the reasoning and higher-level thinking skills measured by tests like the SAT."

In a similar finding in 1995, James O'Dea, Drake University, studied 424 students at Valley High School in West Des Moines, Iowa. The results showed that "there is a significant difference between the grade-point averages of those involved in extracurricular activities and those not involved in extracurricular activities."

We have learned that extracurricular school activities (ESAs) build learning skills and help students prepare for the future. They integrate neurological functions, which aid performance in other subject areas. Anecdotes from teachers, parents and students tell us that ESAs encourage logical thinking and organizational competence. In short, individuals develop the ability to multitask. By advancing expertise in effective communication and the ability to collaborate with others, ESAs help create well-rounded scholars.

Even stronger supporting evidence about the value of ESAs was published more recently. In 2005, Howard Everson and Roger Mill-

and the development of interpersonal competence ... These skills, are in turn, associated with high educational status at young adulthood." The authors explained that the confidence gained from activity participation helped students set high goals for the future and to advance to postsecondary education.

Besides improving scholastic performance, educators must find ways to prevent teens from dropping out of school and devise techniques to close the substantial gap in academic outcomes between socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged students.

H.W. Marsh and S. Kleitman presented a persuasive case for ESAs in the *Harvard Education Review* in 2002, explaining, "ESAs actually reduce the inequality gap ... the benefits tend to be larger, certainly not smaller, for more disadvantaged students."

Joseph Mahoney and Robert Cairns, conducting research at the University of North Carolina in 1997, found that involvement in ex-

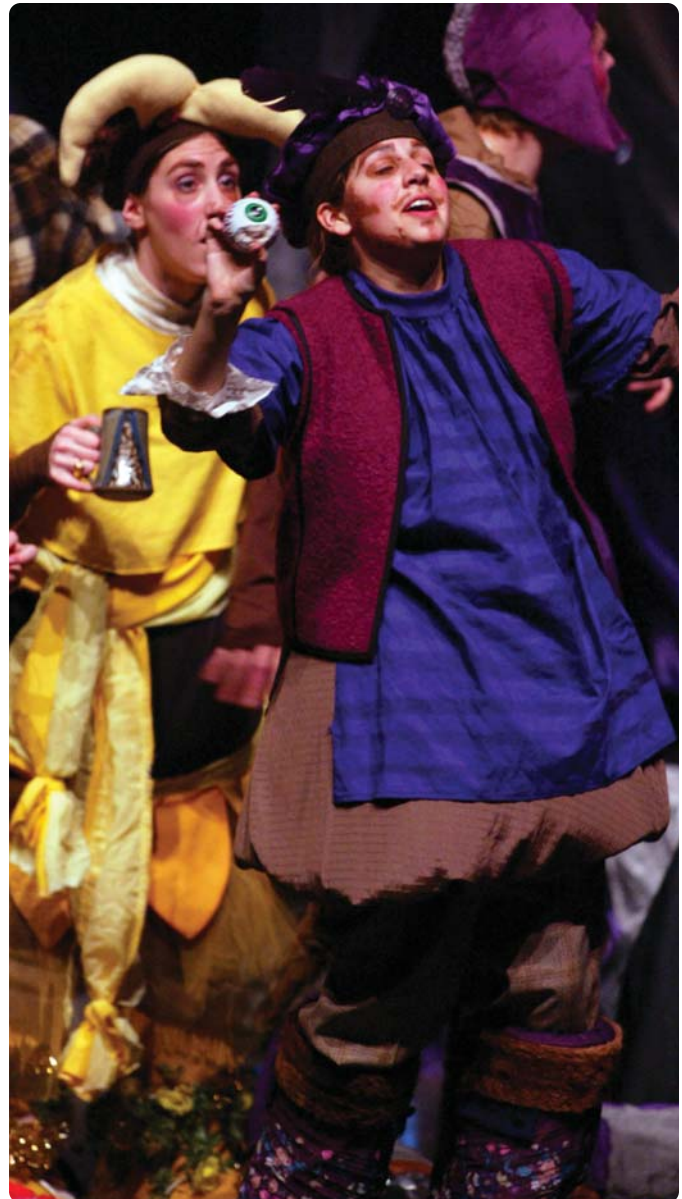


Photo provided by 2020 Photographic, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan

traccurrucular activities keeps at-risk students in school. Their study indicated, "... engagement in school extracurrucular activities is linked to decreasing rates of early school dropout in both boys and girls. The outcome is observed primarily among students who were at highest risk for dropout."

The reasons are evident why ESAs encourage at-risk students. They help develop a positive emotional response to learning by promoting access to a variety of human insights and enriching the learning environment. Because ESAs improve a student's overall academic performance, socioeconomically disadvantaged teens are more likely to find school a positive place to be; therefore, they stay involved in the educational process. Most of all, ESAs challenge individuals to explore – creating curious, lifelong learners. Students actually desire to continue their education.

The argument is made; the evidence is clear. ESAs, especially

academic competition and the fine arts, prepare students for college and the workplace. Yes, cutting extracurrucular activities might be a simple approach to balancing a budget, but it is certainly the wrong one. It eliminates improved test scores, higher academic achievement and dropout reduction. As educators, we are in the business of finding the best ways to teach our students. We need to think carefully before we cut extracurrucular activities from our budget so that we do not throw the baby out with the bath water.

©

Paula Fisher presently serves as the Academic Grant Coordinator for the Texas University Interscholastic League. She has been a high school administrator, department chairman, academic coordinator, and a speech, debate and English teacher. In 1989, she authored the national high school debate topic and in 1990, was named the National Outstanding Speech Educator by the NFHS Speech, Debate and Theatre Association.