The Research Proves It!

For a long time, student activities have been the subject of a curious chicken-or-egg style debate: Do student activities improve student performance, or do better-performing students participate in student activities? The implications of this debate have left stakeholders scrambling for answers.

Let X = Student Activities, a new program developed by the Alliance for Student Activities in partnership with the National Association of Secondary School Principals, proves that the answer to both of these questions is an emphatic yes. A wealth of rigorous, peer-reviewed research indicates that activities are the spark that ignites measurable improvement in student performance. The results are even more pronounced among students with previously low GPAs or discipline concerns. Through Let X = Student Activities, the Alliance is committed to providing stakeholders with the information, the tools, and the motivation needed to ensure that student activities become an indispensable part of every educational reform equation.

The studies cited here represent only a fraction of the more than one hundred studies that prove whatever your desired outcome, participation in student activities benefits students of all academic levels and backgrounds.*


Student activities boost academic performance.

Participation in student activities is linked to higher math and English grades (Broh 2002); improved grades, coursework selection, and homework completion (Marsh & Kleitman 2003); better performance on math, reading, and science tests (Gerber 1996); improved classroom preparation and higher achievement in math and science (Jordan & Nettles 2000); higher scores on geography, history, math, reading, and science tests (Schreiber & Chambers 2002); and increased likelihood of applying to college and the submission of an increased number of college applications (Marsh & Kleitman 2003).


Student activities reduce dropout risks.

Participation in at least one student activity decreases the likelihood that a student will drop out of school (Mahoney 2000; Zill et al. 1995). The positive effect of participation in relation to the dropout rate is strongest among at-risk students (Mahoney & Cairns 1997) and minorities (Davalos et al. 1999; Melnick et al. 1992b).


Student activities lead to college and career success.

Students who participate in student activities are more likely to want to attend college and submit more college applications (Marsh and Kleitman 2003). Participants in middle and high school student activities are more likely to enroll in college (Marsh and Kleitman 2003), stay enrolled (Barber et al. 2001; Mahoney et al. 2003), get better grades (Zaff et al. 2003), graduate (Barber et al. 2001), and pursue graduate school education (Marsh and Kleitman 2003).


Student activities set students up to make better choices and reduce high risk behaviors.

Young people who participate in student activities consume less tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana than non-participants (Cooley et al. 1995). Young women who participate in student activities delay the onset of sexual activity, have sexual relations less frequently and with fewer partners, use contraception more reliably, and have lower rates of pregnancy (Miller et al. 1998 & 1999). Participation in student activities reduces the rates of teen pregnancy (Zill et al. 1995).


Student activities build social and emotional skills.

Participation in student activities alleviates depression (Mahoney et al. 2002), especially among female students with low GPAs (Gore et al. 2001). Participation in student activities increases student self-confidence (Perry-Burney & Takyi 2002) and self-esteem, particularly among minority males (Tracy & Erkut 2002). Student activities may create the conditions in which students can learn a sense of autonomy, self-belief, and self-expression (Shelly 2011). Participants in student activities develop greater leadership skills than non-participants, which translates into a greater likelihood of moving into managerial positions, higher pay in later life, and greater career success in general (Dobosz and Beaty 1999; Kuhn and Weinberger 2005; National Federation for High School Activities 2004).


According to Bryan Shelly, Ph.D., data strategist at the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and author of *Money, Mandates, and Local Control in American Public Education*, these studies employ rigid statistical controls. In other words, the results are independent of family, school, demographic, and other background characteristics. This means that student activities are the critical variable that makes the difference. This research proves that participation in student activities promotes student success in the classroom and on the test. Not only are student activities an integral part of every student achievement equation at the middle school and high school levels, but the studies show that activities also pave the way for achievement in college, career, and community.