

THE ADVOCATE



Be a Champion

A physical fitness advocate uses the area's natural resources to create an engaging after-school club.

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An educator employs his own love of skateboarding to make science relatable, relevant, and fun.

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The Competitive Edge

Real-World Scenarios Build Skills and the Confidence to Succeed

BY KATHLEEN WILSON SHRYOCK

In the real world, competition comes with the territory. People regularly compete for rewards, recognition, jobs, and promotions. So it should come as no surprise that competitions at the high school level can provide big benefits for student participants. By offering opportunities to showcase and develop skills and talents through real-world scenarios, quality competitions can help students boost their confidence, build marketable skills, and gain valuable feedback from industry experts.

SkillsUSA is a career and technology-based education partnership that comprises students, teachers, and business professionals. Through cocurricular programs and integral student activities, SkillsUSA helps students see how what they are learning applies to the needs of employers. In addition, the career and technical education experiences provided by SkillsUSA help students explore areas of interest while they are still in high school.

A Passport to the Future

Competitions are one way that SkillsUSA effectively prepares young people for life after graduation. The SkillsUSA Championships encourage students to work toward a goal and display their skills in a competitive venue. Contests begin locally and continue through the state and national levels. In 2014, almost 6,000 contestants competed in 98 diverse events, including automotive repair, entrepreneurship, and medical math.

Timothy Lawrence, executive director of SkillsUSA, explains that because they are designed, managed, and judged by industry experts, the Championships provide students and teachers →

“Before they begin their postsecondary education or enter the workforce, **students who participate in competitive events build a strong foundation for success.** They get out of their comfort zones by taking on challenging opportunities and stretching their intellectual and creative capabilities.”
- Sandy Spavone



with an authentic assessment of industry expectations. “These events test student learning and [college and career] readiness, provide access to business and industry, and create common bonds between students who have similar ambitions and interests,” he said. “And the contests are a way of connecting [students] to the future. Working directly with business professionals allows students to meet actual employers and gain valuable real-world skills.”

In addition to helping students fine-tune specific abilities, the relevance of skills-based competitions engages students in what they are learning and helps them develop personal competencies that are valuable in any industry. “Testing yourself against the best in your class, community, state, or in the nation is personally demanding and energizing,” said Lawrence.

“Competitions represent learning by doing, which is something that career and technical education students typically love. Any time you test yourself against a high standard of performance, you will learn and grow. That is always a positive, regardless of where you place in the competition.”

Nancy Ditmer is the immediate past president of the National Association for Music Education (NAfME), and is currently the director of bands and professor of music education at the College of Wooster in Wooster, OH. As a national organization that advocates for music education and provides support and resources for music educators and their students, NAfME presents or cosponsors several competitive events throughout the year, including the All-American Marching Band and the Student Composers Competition. Ditmer agrees that well-run competitions for teams and individuals can encourage students to develop skills that are transferrable to any life pursuit. “When competitions are done the right way, they can be extremely engaging. They motivate students to work harder and take their performance to the next level,” she said. “Constructive advice can show students their strengths and provide specific suggestions on how to correct their weaknesses. In the process, students develop important skills like perseverance and self-discipline.”

Sandy Spavone, executive director of Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA), agrees that quality competitive events can help students develop the skills they need to succeed. FCCLA is a nonprofit national career and technical student organization for students in family and consumer sciences. The organization’s individual and team competitions are designed to help students expand their leadership potential. Skill-demonstration events provide opportunities for individual students to display skills ranging from culinary arts to fashion design. The Family and Consumer Sciences Knowledge Bowl is a team competition that challenges students’ knowledge of all aspects of family and consumer sciences.

Spavone affirms that competitions like this help students not only gain industry-specific skills but also develop practical competencies that apply to all avenues of future life. Students who participate in FCCLA-related competitions report gains in creativity, problem



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solving, community awareness, writing skills, and STEM proficiency. And 91 percent of students who compete in FCCLA’s STAR (Students Taking Action with Recognition) events indicate that participation is “very” or “extremely” useful to their college and career preparations.

Teamwork is another competency that is highly valued by 21st-century employers. Mark Koski is the director of sports, events, and development for the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), an organization that supports and establishes consistent standards for education-based interscholastic sports and activities. Koski believes that membership on a competitive team can teach students how to win and lose gracefully, and how to work with others to achieve goals or overcome obstacles. In addition, teamwork can build individual

esteem. “Competitions reinforce the pride students feel in their own accomplishments and in their team,” he said. “Competitive events allow students to showcase their work and give them a sense of pride [when they compete] in front of their peers and family members. This pride carries into all aspects of life, both on the competition surfaces and off. Competitions bring students together during nonschool hours, showcase emerging leaders, and give confidence to students who might have otherwise avoided the spotlight. This has a huge ripple effect on the culture of the school community.”

Cocurricular Competencies

Competitions can also be used to reinforce what students are learning in the classroom. Spavone explains that FCCLA is an integrated part of the family and consumer sciences curriculum, and the competitions give students the chance to put their learning into action. Many advisers use competitive events as performance assessments or as a foundation for classroom assignments.

Spavone describes how a teacher could capitalize on the Sports Nutrition STAR Event as a basis for a class project about nutrition. In the example, students are asked to follow the event’s guidelines for developing an individualized wellness plan for a student athlete. Students are also asked to prepare an oral presentation, assuming the role of a dietician and giving practical management tools that can be used to monitor the athlete’s progress. “These activities reinforce and put into practice content knowledge and also bring into focus a career opportunity,” said Spavone. “Students with a high interest in this project would be great candidates to enter a completed project in the [STAR] competition.”

Lawrence of SkillsUSA believes that competitions are a great way to reinforce the curriculum and also to firmly establish the teacher’s role as a student mentor. He advises educators to pay close attention to the skills being tested by the industry experts who design and adjudicate the competitions. “Incorporating those same competencies into daily lesson plans or lab experiences can keep curricula relevant and current. [Preparation for] the competitions also facilitates a closer connection between student and teacher.”

Constructing Healthy Events

Participation in competitions can provide students with interactive opportunities to develop valuable skills and can even help students discover a career path that aligns with their interests and abilities. But not every competition is right for every student, and sometimes events don't provide productive results. So, how can educators and event organizers ensure that the competition is a healthy learning experience for everyone?

As with any event, success starts with careful planning and communication. Lawrence explains that the quality of SkillsUSA Championships is directly related to the workings of the technical (planning) committee. Committee members are charged with securing a venue that meets the needs of the contest and with procuring judges, equipment, and prizes. Effectively communicating contest expectations with educators and candidates is a priority. But of all planning duties, securing quality volunteers from the industry—and ensuring that they understand their roles in designing and adjudicating the competition—is one of the most important. The feedback students receive from industry professionals provides valuable insight into their academic, technical, and communication skills. For this reason, the job of a contest adjudicator is critical.

Ditmer, who has served as an adjudicator at a variety of music competitions, encourages educators—and potential judges—to remember that a judge's role should be to further the education of the student competitors and their advisers. "Contests are opportunities to gain valuable feedback that can improve student performance and help teachers be better teachers, if the contestants take the comments to heart," said Ditmer. "It's important for students and teachers to realize that the judging is subjective and comments are based on a specific performance at a specific point in time. It's also important for judges to be constructive, to follow up with specific suggestions on how to correct problems, and to take the time to point out the things that the group is doing well."

Above all, Ditmer advises educators to keep competitive events in perspective and to actively model these ideals when working with students. Specifically, she encourages teachers to present contests and competitions as a supplement to an engaging program, not as the reason for the program. "There are lots of plusses to participating in competitions and a few minuses. The minuses are often driven by the teacher, because the students' attitudes reflect the teacher's views," said Dittmer. "Don't let the competition be the tail that wags

the dog. Students get burned out if the only thing they are working for is the prize. Instead, use competitions as a learning experience that encourages students to do their personal best, have a good time, develop camaraderie, and gain personal satisfaction."

Koski of NFHS agrees that proper guidance from educators is key to avoiding competition pitfalls such as students being overconfident, believing they are exempt from the rules, or feeling discouraged if things don't go as expected. Therefore, one of NFHS's main initiatives is a focus on education for coaches. "Coaches need to stay knowledgeable on current rules and trends to help them improve their teaching skills," he said. "Coaches are strongly encouraged to keep a pulse on their team dynamics and address any undesirable behaviors immediately."

Lawrence also underscores the importance of keeping competitions in perspective and explains that contests are a complementary element to a variety of tools and programs that help students challenge themselves and grow in confidence. "Professional development, community service, leadership training, and school-to-work opportunities all help students prepare for the next steps," he said. "SkillsUSA is about all aspects of personal and professional development that lead to meaningful and rewarding lives and careers."

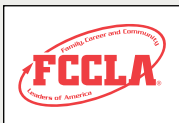
When properly planned and adjudicated, competitions can help students establish relevant learning experiences and build useful skills for college and career. Spavone reports that FCCLA alumni often share how the process of learning to complete a project and prepare it for competition gave them the confidence to complete complex assignments for college and in the workplace. "Before they begin their postsecondary education or enter the workforce, students who participate in competitive events build a strong foundation for success," she said. "They get out of their comfort zones by taking on challenging opportunities and stretching their intellectual and creative capabilities. Simply put, the time, effort, enthusiasm, and passion they invest in competitive events help them develop skills for life." ●

TO WATCH a video of SkillsUSA Championships, go to a4sa.org/SkillsUSA.

VIEW the Competitive Events Guide from FCCLA at a4sa.org/FCCLA-Events.

LEARN more about education programs for coaches, including educators, administrators, and parents at nfhslearn.com.

STUDENT COMPETITION RESOURCES



FAMILY, CAREER, AND COMMUNITY LEADERS OF AMERICA Involvement in FCCLA's Competitive Events programs offers members with opportunities to expand their leadership potential and develop skills for life necessary in families, communities, and workplaces.



FUTURE PROBLEM SOLVING PROGRAM INT'L FPSPi stimulates critical and creative thinking skills, encourages students to develop a vision for the future, and prepares students for leadership roles. The organization hosts two competitive events each year and engages thousands of students from Australia, Hong Kong, India, United Kingdom, and the US.



SkillsUSA The SkillsUSA Championship is a showcase for career and technical students. Contests in a variety of diverse fields—including culinary arts, carpentry, automotive repair, and health care—begin locally and continue through the state and national levels.



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MUSIC EDUCATION NAfME is an arts education organization that offers support for music educators and their students. The organization presents or co-sponsors a variety of competitions, calls, auditions, and performance opportunities.



NATIONAL SCHOLASTIC PRESS ASSOCIATION NSPA is a nonprofit membership organization for high school and other secondary school publications. The organization offers members resources to help their publications improve, including national high school journalism conventions, contests and scholarships, and a publication critique service.



YOUNG PLAYWRIGHTS INC. This organization is dedicated to identifying, developing, and promoting playwrights age 18 and under in the classroom and the artistic community. See their site for a list of playwriting competitions.

a4sa.org/resources

Dr. Eric's Skate Club: A Common-Sense Approach to Student Engagement

DR. ERIC SMILTNEEK appreciates the beauty of Wisconsin's natural resources. An avid skater since the age of four, the family physician still seeks the serenity and physical fitness offered by outdoor ice-skating. It was during an afternoon skating excursion at Miller's Bay in Oshkosh, WI, that Smiltneek began to wonder why more of Wisconsin's young people were not taking advantage of the recreational resources right in their own backyards. One short month later, Dr. Eric's Skate Club was launched. Today, more than 60 students from Webster Stanley Elementary and Middle Schools (Oshkosh, WI) take to the ice every Thursday for an after-school club that promotes physical fitness and community connections.

Smiltneek's idea for an after-school skating club began to take shape in December 2013, following brainstorming sessions with friend and Oshkosh school board member Steve Eliassen. Together they discussed potential barriers, access to equipment, and ways to best use the beautiful bay that was literally within walking distance of the campus. The two

gained support from school administrators and board members. Smiltneek also approached local businesses for donations of new and gently used equipment.

Just a few weeks later, students headed to the bay for the club's inaugural event, which featured Dr. Christina Lehner, a local veterinarian who was an alternate on the 2002 US Olympic speed-skating team.

The club is now in its second year and has become a popular weekly activity for more than 30 percent of Webster's students. A grant has allowed several local health-care providers, including ThedaCare and the Neuro Spine Center, to provide free skates and helmets so that all students, regardless of income, are able to participate. The program also attracts parents, who are on-site to assist students with equipment and to join in the fun of gliding across the ice, working on their figure-skating moves, or practicing hockey-style goal shooting.

For Smiltneek, the club has provided the perfect opportunity to serve his community and to promote the physical fitness of students who might be spending their free time on electronics rather than enjoying activities in the great outdoors. "As a doctor, I have spent a lot of time learning from computers and books in a traditional setting and have excelled in this type of learning environment, but many of my most meaningful lessons occurred on a frozen pond, gliding through the woods, or watching the waves from inside a boat," he said. "In an age of [school-related] budget cuts, it's important for all of us to step up and serve our schools and communities. Our society and our young people are suffering from activity deficit. The club allows me to share my love of outdoor activities with students and helps teach lifelong skating skills."

School board member Eliassen believes that the skating club is the perfect cure for cabin fever. And by making the most of available resources, the club is an affordable, effective way to promote the physical, emotional, and social health of students. "With student activities, there can be a misperception that they are expensive and difficult to manage. But it doesn't have to be that way. Activities can be simple and affordable," Eliassen said. "There are lots of perceived barriers, but I have not found one that is insurmountable. It's amazing how a committed group of people can find solutions." ●

TO WATCH a video about Dr. Eric's Skate Club, go to a4sa.org/SkatingClub.



"Our society and our young people are suffering from activity deficit. The club allows me to share my love of outdoor activities with students and helps teach lifelong skating skills."



Activities Organizations Help Schools Provide a Comprehensive Education

MICHELLE MCGRATH, EdD, is the executive director of the Wisconsin Association of School Councils (WASC). In a recent interview, McGrath shared why it's important to *make the time* for student activities when providing students with the essential skills required for success.

Why are student activities programs a necessity in helping students prepare for college and career?

In my role on the Downtown Madison (WI) Rotary Board of Directors and in my position with WASC, I spend a significant amount of time with business leaders. Our conversations always include what these businesspeople are seeing as young people move into jobs at their various companies. Often, young people have spent significant time in the classroom mastering their academic work, but their ability to connect with people, communicate effectively, and collaborate on a project is lacking. That's why employers often hire the candidates with robust experience in service or student activities, not necessarily the candidates with the highest GPAs. It is the soft skills students acquired through student activities that are landing them jobs and allowing them to be successful in their new roles.

Schools, quite frankly, do not have the time or resources to provide the due diligence and training needed to equip students with these skills. It's also difficult for schools to find the time to equip teachers with adequate training [to address soft skill development in their students]. They have so many things on their plates at this time, and the priority simply is not there. Activities organizations such as the WASC have not only the expertise, but also the time and resources to provide opportunities that meet the needs of students in desperate need of soft-skill development. By providing venues for student learning, as well as training for educators, student activities organizations can assist with behavioral development and career readiness, while

schools spend time on the ingredients necessary for academic success. [Activities and academics] working together is the most effective way to educate the whole child.

What is your advice for educators and administrators who believe that they don't have the time or the funds to offer activities programs?

It all comes down to priorities. I am currently working with FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) and Rotary Youth Leadership Awards, two youth programs that are spearheaded and funded by prominent business owners. In both organizations, I was brought in to teach students soft skills—the exact skills that are necessary for college and career success. These are the skills that business owners are not seeing demonstrated by new graduates entering the workforce. Schools need to realize that this type of training is essential.

The research confirms that student activities increase student outcomes in many ways. With this in mind, how can we convince stakeholders that activities are a good use of time and money?

Statistics are one thing, but my best research comes from the students and administrators themselves. The testimonials I receive on a daily basis are enough for me and for many administrators to say, "Yes, this program is making a difference." I am inspired when students share personal information about how much they have learned, or when these students are inspired to start something new and follow it through to completion. These [testimonials] are the proof that sells activities programs. ●

TO LEARN MORE about programs and resources from the Wisconsin Association of School Councils, visit WASCLeader.com.

ACTIVITY CONNECTION

Learning the Physics of Skateboarding Engages Kids in Science

BY **BILL ROBERTSON, PhD**

I'VE BEEN AN EDUCATOR for over 20 years, a journey that's taken me from being a middle and high school teacher to an Associate Professor of Science Education. I've also been a skateboarder for over 37 years. I started riding my board when I was a seventh grader in my hometown of Richmond,



Virginia and stayed with it because it was fun and something I could do with my friends. Skateboarding quickly became my passion. It's still part of my everyday life and continues to influence the way in which I see the world.

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“Dr. Skateboard” was a nickname I earned as a skateboarding educator. I’ve made it my mission to inspire students toward pursuing goals in education along with their own personal interests. My inspiration for choosing skateboarding to teach physics came from my work with middle school students who were not interested in the topics of science class until I showed how much of physics, such as forces and motion, were found in things they did regularly—like skateboarding.

Often, students will ask their teacher, “What is the point of this?” or “Why are we doing this anyway?” They want to know exactly how the material they’re learning in class will apply to their everyday lives because, at times, it seems disconnected from what they do. Physical science concepts are often taught quite traditionally in school, and in an almost clinical manner, isolated to a specific circumstance within a classroom. This is what disconnects the tools and the content from the students’ experiences. There is a real need for educators to explore and connect content in settings that are both authentic and relatable for students.

This is what I set out to do through “action science,” which makes science real to students and makes learning relatable. For me, skateboarding is a great way to do that. For example, in skateboarding, one trick you need to master is the Ollie. The Ollie, a skater’s technique for flying through the air, showcases the principles of flight by demonstrating that you have to overcome gravity with lift, and friction (or drag) with thrust. And in this way, the physics principles of flight are the same for a skateboarder as they are for an airplane. When students understand these ideas, they’re not just skateboarders. They become scientists riding around in a field laboratory, engaging in concepts in motion, forces, and simple machines.

As a teacher, I’ve seen that by first providing students with educational experiences and then introducing content, it maps better to how the modern student learns. So, under the banner of action science, and through the use of skateboarding, motivation and engagement become central ideas for both students and educators alike. ●

TO READ this article in its entirety, go to a4sa.org/ScienceofSkateboarding.

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BE A CHAMPION

what can you do?

Anyone can:

- Be an advocate** for the availability of a **wider variety of clubs and organizations.**
- Show teachers, parents, administrators, and community members** the specific benefits of **participation in at least one activity** for several hours each week.
- Share the research** on activity involvement with parents, teachers, administrators, and community members.
- Empower students to thrive** in school by helping them: find their spark, identify their champions, and connect with opportunities offered through student activities.
- Show up** at competitions, plays, inductions, awards programs, games, and other events to let students know that **you support their involvement.**

Advisers can:

- Promote participation** in student activities to the students you see regularly. Use your influence to get them involved.
- Invite principals, the superintendent, and school board members** to attend your events and let them **see students engaged in meaningful activities.**
- Demonstrate the reach** of your program by gathering data on the number of students who participate in your events, activities, and programs—and publishing that information.

Research clearly shows that participation in student activities:

- ✓ Increases test scores
- ✓ Lowers dropout rates
- ✓ Reduces risky behavior
- ✓ Develops social and emotional skills
- ✓ Provides a springboard to college and career success

But arts, athletics, and activities programs are the missing variable in too many educational reform equations.

You have the power to turn that around!

Be a Champion.

Alliance for Student Activities

a4sa.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.

a4sa.org

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

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