WHY WE PLAY

High school athletics and activities are a valued part of our culture. We value these activities because we know that students who are involved acquire something meaningful through their participation. But have we ever looked closely at how they benefit? What do the students who participate in school athletic and activity programs actually receive?

Decades of research shows that participation provides students with experiences they can draw upon for a lifetime. Valuable life lessons can be learned from participating on a team—lessons such as:

- working through adversity;
- finding the courage necessary to move outside one's comfort zone to learn something new;
- overcoming failure; and
- developing confidence and growing as a human being.

The potential for this growth only exists if we are aware and if we are intentional and recognize that something deep and lasting is possible for the students who participate. We must realize that through participation there is an incredible potential for growth to occur—growth that, if fostered, will impact that student for a lifetime.

WHY DO WE PLAY? We play to give students MORE than physical skill development. We play to give them MORE that leads to COURAGE, CONFIDENCE, FAILURE, BELONGING, and GROWTH.

MINNESOTA STATE HIGH SCHOOL LEAGUE

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When students are connected to an experience and have a relationship with an adult who really cares about them, belonging and a sense of security follows. When we intentionally create a place of belonging, the conditions are right for deeper, life-changing experiences where work can be done collectively to reach a common goal; where everyone has a role; where students can be themselves and are also aware that they are part of something greater than themselves; and where learning, growth and connection are the purpose.

Why We Play

We play to give students MORE.

We play to develop the human potential of the students who participate.

Confidence

Confidence is born out of trying. Trying is attempting something new; it is the struggle to overcome difficulties; it is striving for something more. A willingness to try is what puts students into the arena. The skill development of students occurs when they try and fail, and then try and fail again, sometimes hundreds of times. We need to celebrate, not discourage, a student’s willingness to try.

Courage

It takes courage for students to show up every day in this public arena called high school activities. It takes courage to be the students who wait for their turn to get into the game, to take the last shot, to be put into the game to throw one pitch with the bases loaded or to stand center stage. It takes courage to show up and perform knowing mistakes will surely occur, to enter into a public arena where failure is inevitable, and to move outside of one’s comfort zone and risk something new.

Growth

We have to define our purpose. We have to focus on more than surface-level outcomes. We have to shine the light brightly on the real reasons WHY WE PLAY—the human growth and development of the students who participate. We have to become intentional about developing the student’s potential and providing them with skills that will sustain them for a lifetime.

Failure

When did students learn that mistakes and failure are negative and should be avoided, that somehow they should achieve without failure? Much of their willingness to risk trying something new is determined by how we as adults respond to their efforts: the point guard’s risk to drive the lane with the left hand instead of the dominant right, the lead in the one-act play who is willing to stand center stage and deliver the line, or the goaltender who takes the risk to leave the comfort of the blue-painted crease to challenge the oncoming shooter. All of these risks take the student out of his or her comfort zone to the land of uncertainty, where there is a good chance that failure will occur. Our response to their efforts, and to their risks and their failures will either encourage them to try something new or convince them to stay locked safely in a risk-free comfort zone.

Participation in high school athletics and activities provides students with more than an outcome on the scoreboard and physical skill development. It prepares them for more than the game or competition. Participation provides students with the skills necessary to be prepared for life.

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