

Sit mens sana in corpore sano. This Latin phrase was inscribed on side ^{the} ~~the side~~ of a building as I rode the Zurich tram to and fro. It means: "Let there be a healthy mind in healthy body." (Roman poet Juvenal) ^{14 years ago}

Recently I was listening to a radio ad for a hall of fame induction at a local high school. I ~~soon~~ ^{soon} realized it was enshrining various individuals for their athletic ^{body} achievements. It seems to me that 90% of the time when you enter a high school and view the trophy cases, they are filled, not with academic achievements or awards, but sports trophies. What about skinny math genius, or those skilled at debate: do they get their names etched on the trophies in the ~~school trophy~~ ^{school} showcase? Rarely! Here's the question I'd like you to ponder: Should feats of physical prowess trump mental accomplishment, especially at schools, whose primary task should be to teach reading, writing and arithmetic...?

It piqued my interest ^{on} in this question, when I saw the cover article on the October issue of The Atlantic, showing a football player tackling a skinny bespectacled student with books and papers flying in all directions. The article is titled: "The Case Against High School Sports: ~~The Real Reason U.S. Students are Falling Behind.~~" It begins by surveying foreign exchange students: One student from S. Korea named Jenny said: "Sports are a big deal here." She was surprised how much time, energy and money we Americans sink into sports. ~~Sports have become central to the mission of American high schools.~~

That article continues,

"Sports are embedded in American schools in a way they are not almost anywhere else. Yet this difference hardly ever comes up on domestic debates about American's international mediocrity in education (the U.S. ranks 31st on the same international math test)."

The article shows we are falling further and further behind the rest of the world in science, math and ^{other disciplines} ~~languages~~. But, at the same time we are spending more than any other nation on, you guessed it, school sports. This poses an important question: is the sports over-emphasis a wise direction for us to be going when our economy is sagging, unemployment remains high and our national and trade deficits are burgeoning almost beyond calculation?

The author concedes the benefit of school sports, ~~at best~~ sports give kids some exercise, teach them about sportsmanship and arouse school spirit; but the costs can be steep. Should we not spend more time and energy encouraging the pursuit of math and science and rewarding students who excel in ~~these~~ ^{academic} arenas? How many of us know the local high school jock, widely proclaimed as a hero for saving the high school football or basketball ~~team~~ ^{season}, who then went on to...do ~~nothing~~. The number of high school ~~boys~~ ^{students} who go on to play professional sports hovers between one in 500 to one in 5,000. The number of high school math whizzes who land good jobs today is immeasurably higher. I'd say we are majoring in the minors... and most high school baseball players don't even make the minors, ~~let alone the majors~~.

Sport is fun, escape and largely fantasy. If our high schools continue to feed the fantasy that sports are where it's at, we will continue to sag as a nation and fall behind in the race for strong economies, good jobs and smart people using the most powerful organ in the human body: their brain. A healthy body is a blessing, but a healthy mind should be the highest priority of the American school. ~~[The Stoic philosopher Seneca wrote: Cogenda mens est ut incipiat: "The mind must be stimulated for it to make a beginning."]~~

This has been Dan Price for Community Comment