

## RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

*From Research to Practice, a column dedicated to recognizing successful "bridges" between researchers and practitioners, reports on research with practical implications for youth civic engagement. Additionally, it presents concrete examples of how practitioners have applied this research to encourage the participation of young people in civic and political life.*

### HOW CAN SPORTS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MIX?

In February 2006, CIRCLE released two new research studies analyzing the relationship between youth sports and youth civic engagement. The first study, a Fact Sheet entitled "Participation in Sports and Civic Engagement" by Mark Hugo Lopez and Kimberlee Moore from CIRCLE, offers a detailed look at the role sports play in the civic development of 18 to 25 year olds. The data show that young people who participated in sports activities during their high school years were more likely than non-sports participants to have volunteered, registered to vote, voted, and followed the news closely. The second study is entitled "Sports, Youth and Character: A Critical Survey" and was written by Robert Fullinwider, a research scholar at the University of Maryland. Fullinwider completed a literature review on the effects of sports participation on youth ages 4 to 18, and found conflicting analyses and a dearth of reliable, data-driven research on the role sports play in character development. This article explores how coaches, parents and sports programs play a role in drawing connections between sports and civic engagement.

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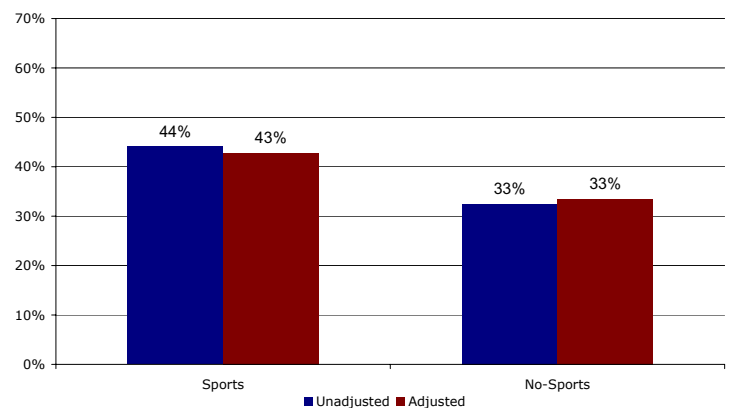
#### WHAT PART DOES COACHING PLAY?

There are many ways in which a coach can teach civic engagement lessons through sports. In his CIRCLE Working Paper, Fullinwider states that "parent education in all sports is made mandatory by many county and municipal recreation departments, using tools provided by the Parents Association for Youth Sports, [an] offshoot of the National Alliance for Youth Sports." In addition, the American Sports Education Program (ASEP) has developed many trainings for coaches. A description of ASEP's 'Coaching Principles' course includes, among other topics, a "Coaching for Character" section, as well as a "Managing Relationships" section.

Additionally, there are various other ways that coaches can encourage civic engagement through sports. Gregory Clark, Youth Coordinator for the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, believes that sports have the ability to teach young people leadership principles, teamwork, and an understanding that people "need to do their part." "Sports teach you how to communicate. I believe that transfers over to civic engagement...it actually teaches the athlete to speak up and voice his/her opinion." However, Clark does not "think that most coaches know they're instilling those skills."

Rick Eckstein, a Sociology professor at Villanova University, coaches his 12 year old daughter's sports team. Eckstein points out that while there may be opportunities for coaches to help young people learn civic skills through sports, there are "huge philosophical clashes" within the league that he coaches. He explains that some teams focus on winning while others focus on teaching participants to be "a good sport" and to have fun. This reluctantly moves him to suggest that there "should be an emphasis put on the non-sports part of coaching," potentially through clinics for volunteer coaches. Such clinics, for example,

**Graph 1: Sports Participation and Voting in 2000; Unadjusted and Adjusted Rates, 18-25 Year Olds, 2002.**



**Graph 1 Note:** Adjusted percentages are predicted probabilities based on a model that controls for gender, race/ethnicity, age, marital status, educational attainment, other high school activity involvement, work status, income status, region, MSA status, college student status, number of kids in household, household size, internet use, household head status, and rent status. This model was estimated for 18-25 year olds. All results are weighted.

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might teach coaches about the possible civic benefits of sports participation.

Eckstein also suggests that gender is an important consideration for coaches when thinking about how sports impacts young people, including the relationship between sports and civic engagement and character development. The Lopez/Moore research finds that there are small gender differences in the effects of sports on certain civic behaviors. For example, the research suggests that boys who play sports are more likely to pay attention to the news (particularly sports news) than girls who play sports or boys who do not participate in sports.

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## THE ROLE OF PARENTS

Parents play a large role in encouraging sports participation. Clark notes, "Kids participate in sports because their parents sign them up. A lot of kids don't want to participate." He suggests that pointing out the connections between sports and civic engagement may entice more parents to sign their children up for sports programs. For example, if parents are made aware that there are research findings suggesting that young people who participate in sports are more likely to volunteer and to vote, they may be more likely to encourage their child to engage in sports activities. As a result, he believes that statistics on the relationship between sports and civic engagement could help with recruitment and membership in local sports programs.

## SPORTS PROGRAMS

Finally, the research findings on sports and civic engagement have the potential to assist in the planning and evaluation processes of sports programs. Eckstein suggests that communities may be able to have more of a positive influence on youth sports through careful planning. While Eckstein would like to see more rigorous, longitudinal research on the sports experience, he does feel that

it's important to consider the changing social meaning of sports. He cautions that if communities want to see more benefits from sports, including potentially civic benefits, they need to think carefully about the message that is being conveyed through sports programs. According to Eckstein, "Sports can help, sports can hurt, it depends. It largely depends on the message that is coming from sports. I would suggest that communities take a hold of the message." ■

### THE CAMPAIGN FOR THE CIVIC MISSION OF SCHOOLS LAUNCHES NATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL

On April 17th, 2006 CIRCLE Director Peter Levine spoke along with Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, Governor Roy Romer, and others at the launch of the National Advisory Council of the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. The event, held at the National Press Club in Washington D.C. was televised by C-SPAN and covered in a nationally syndicated column by David Broder.

Saying "the future of our democracy depends on a better-informed and more-engaged citizenry," former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and former Colorado Governor Roy Romer issued a call to "restore the civic mission of schools and ensure that civic learning is on par with other basic academic subjects."

O'Connor and Romer are co-chairing a National Advisory Council for the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools. The Council includes eminent representatives from politics, law, government, education, business, the arts, and sports.

The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools is working with a coalition of more than 40 organizations to change federal, state, and local policies on civic learning. Among its accomplishments nationally is increasing the frequency of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in civics from every eight years to every four. On the state level, it is supporting campaigns in 18 states. To assist educators, it provides an inventory of effective civic learning resources and practices. For more information, please visit <http://www.civicmissionofschools.org>.