

**I propose this as a speech rather than a letter—an address to the School Board, which could also be given out as an appeal after the meeting.*

Esteemed members of the School Board,

It has come to my attention, and that of many students, that you are currently considering how to allocate funds for extracurricular teams and clubs this year. Always in the past, the majority of funding has gone to the sports team, especially our football team, though basketball, soccer, and hockey get a lot of funding as well. Long experience from those of us who find there is no money to send musicians to competitions, or to buy new lights for the theater, leads us to believe that once again, you'll be allocating funds to sports teams, in the belief that competitive sports are good for students and good for the school. I want to ask you to rethink that position tonight. I don't expect to move you by arguments about the importance of the arts—we've tried those arguments over the past years, to little avail. Still no lights, still no buses, unless you wear a uniform and try to kick or catch a ball. So tonight, I want you to actually think about these athletes, and I want to share some research that may make you reconsider whether you are really doing the right thing by financing the competition industry.

First let's look at the argument that many put forward, that competition teaches valuable lessons in determination and sportsmanship. It turns out, though, that competitive sports mostly teach kids to think some kids are more important than others, and that it's better to catch a ball than to do well in school. How could they not, when what Hank Hill calls an *athletocracy* is established and maintained by the adult community. In his article, "What in the Name of High School Football," Hill implies that academics as well as the arts become devalued when schools celebrate sports victories and athletes over all else (2002). Hill writes from an insider perspective—he has spent four long years at Martha's Vineyard Regional High School, and his experience seems similar to that you would find in our school. Homecoming queens are more celebrated than class president or valedictorian, because the homecoming queen, in our school, is always a cheerleader, and always lead the victory parade for our football team. These events teach students to value sideline cheering more than study, sports more than academics or activism. Those values are not going to lead students to victory later in life, or our nation either.

Another claim that many will make in support of funding our school sports teams is that this massive funding helps kids get academic scholarships. There is some truth to that. Last year we had students who got partial scholarships for football, basketball, hockey, and swimming. In looking at the published scholarship lists from last year's graduation, you'll find that these scholarships were given twice as much to boys as to girls in the graduating class, and that boys were more likely to get full scholarships (2010). Let's think about that data for a moment. First of all, let's consider the hundreds of thousands of dollars that are spent each year on uniforms, field maintenance, coaches, travel costs, equipment. Imagine if all those funds were spent on tutoring, study groups, special science and activist projects, internships. Maybe then instead of sending kids off to play more football, we'd be sending kids off to

M.I.T, or the Ivy Leagues, none of which are allowed to give scholarships for sports. Daniel Gould, Ph.D. reinforces this belief, saying in his article "Are High School Sports Good for Kids," that an "over-emphasis on winning issue is especially significant as when this occurs the educational objectives for involvement are often forgotten" (2010).

Finally, there are two tremendous calamities that befall the athletes themselves—if the lack of time or funding to excel academically weren't enough. Those two calamities are extreme pressure to perform, and likelihood of injury, which are related. In his article "High School, College Football Comes With Risk," Jeffrey Perkel, a healthday reporter for ABC news, shares his research on the dangers of injuries to young athletes. He found that while college players get injured more often, "high school athletes are more likely to end up severely injured," (2011). This study was led by a specialist at the Center for Injury Research and Policy, in Columbus, Ohio. You can verify it by going to their website or accessing the reports of High School Reporting Information Online. Based on reports of the RIO, over 500,000 injuries were reported for football alone in the 2005-2006 season.

In a recent news discussion, Katie Couric also emphasized that many high school athletes end up getting injured in college, and losing their scholarships, and then they have nothing to fall back on. Couric shows that often reports on college scholarships don't share their reports on how many kids lose scholarships. She informs us, as well, that the tremendous pressure that athletes feel, from coaches, parents, and their school, can lead to pressure to find performance enhancing drugs, or even pressure towards suicide. Fox News has been following teen suicides, and surprisingly, athletes are right in that mix, as they seem to feel unbearable pressure to perform. At our school, we know that we've witnessed four teen suicides or accidental deaths in five years. In retrospect, three of those students were acclaimed student athletes. In fact, we should perhaps do more research on the link between drinking, drugs, and injury and death for our young, pressured, athletes, whom you spend great funds on sending across the country to play with others.

I hope you can see that in funding this competition industry, you are not really helping these students or doing what is best for our student body. We could have intense competition at an intramural level, or we could teach athletes to raise their own funds as the arts programs do, which would teach activism and determination a lot more than a bunch of adults giving kids money because they can throw a ball. Our students are worth more than that. They deserve the best education, not just the best time playing.

References:

- Couric, Katie, "Do Athletes Face Unnecessary Pressure?" news broadcast
 Gould, Daniel. "Are High School Sports Good for Kids?" (<http://www.educ.msu.edu/ysi/parents/FAQ/askexperts2.htm>).
 Graduation Pamphlet, 2010.
 Hill, Hank. "What in the Name of High School Football?" *Literary Cavalcade*. (Dec, 2002).
 Perkel, Jeffrey. "High School, College Football Comes With Risk." *Healthday News*, (July 26, 2010).