Let Them All Play!

Several months ago, while presenting to a group of parents regarding the importance of children seeing themselves positively, a parent asked, “If elementary and middle schools want children to see themselves positively, why do they support programs that limit the participation of some students in sports and the arts?” She was referring to programs that limit the participation of some students in sports and the arts.

She stated that her children’s school had informed her youngsters on various occasions that they would not be allowed to participate in music, sports, and other programs because their level of proficiency was not good enough. She complained that this was unfair because their level of proficiency had nothing to do with their desire or willingness to work hard.

Opportunities for All

As a former junior high school teacher/coach, I have to admit that I cut many students in order to produce the “best representation” for our school’s sports teams. I also have to admit that many of the students I eliminated would have benefited greatly from participating on a school team.

When I later held the position of middle school principal, my assistant principal and I worked with parent groups, faculty members, and local businesses to expand our extracurricular programs to ensure there were opportunities for every student to participate, although not always in the sport or activity of their first choice. We did this through the expansion of our sports and after-school programs and by introducing sports that allowed for wide participation, such as cross-country running.

Cutting Out Cuts

Over the years, I have seen other administrators implement alternatives to cut systems in elementary and middle schools, with positive results.

Take, for example, Brentwood Middle School in Pensacola, Florida, where Principal Mary Helen Fryman tackled a system that eliminated students from the school’s cheerleading squad based on not only their proficiency but whether they had the $500-plus to purchase a uniform! Although she met significant resistance from some parents, Fryman allowed all students who desired to cheer to do so. The uniforms were scaled down and more than 50 girls participated in cheering that year.

Fryman, now director of human resource services for Escambia County schools, says, “You have no idea how many people sent notes to me thanking me for taking a stand.”

In the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, a group of principals decided to initiate an interscholastic “no cut and all play” athletic program after hearing presentations about the ill effects of cut systems on preadolescents. The program allows all students to be team members, even if this means that some schools have more than one team in a particular sport.

“...a group of principals decided to initiate a ‘no cut and all play’ athletic program [that] allows all students to be team members, even if that means [having] more than one team in a particular sport.”

Questions to Consider

So what is the answer to the mother’s question of why schools promote programs that separate kids and eliminate them from participation? Before you attempt an answer, let’s look at some other questions:

- Does eliminating some students lead to a climate that enhances or encourages cliques?
- Do these cliques lead to peer intimidation and bullying?
- Do we owe all students the opportunity to participate in higher-level after-school activities?

At first, there were concerns from parents and high school coaches that this type of program would affect the high school talent pool. Those fears have since been quelled. According to Denny Chartier, a former athletic director and presently superintendent of the Iron Mountain district, “Because so many students get a chance to play at the elementary level, our high school teams have become stronger and overall participation in sports at the high school level has increased every year.”

Mike Tomososki, a former administrator who participated in the program, feels that the approach built camaraderie among the students by de-emphasizing the “win at all cost” mentality. “Initially, our middle school teams may not have had the success that coaches and parents had hoped for, but over time our basketball and cheerleading programs—the two directly affected by the no-cut policy—have become stronger.”

Jerry Lynch is a consultant for Education Partnerships Inc. in Skowhegan, Maine. His e-mail address is jerrylynch@earthlink.net.