ELA: Argumentative Writing

Standard:

ELAGSE8W1: Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

Currently, there are many discussions and recommendations about how to improve education and overall student achievement. Comparisons are often made between students in America and students in other nations, and many of these studies emphasize that American students lag behind other countries academically. These discussions, which occur in schools, in communities, and even in political arenas, are complicated by concerns about budget and where priorities should be. Most American high schools have sports programs within the schools. While some people agree that sports should remain an integral part of high schools, others argue that schools should cut back on sports funding to focus more on academics as our focus on athletics is costly and ultimately detrimental to education.

Weigh the claims on both sides, and then write an argumentative essay, in your own words, supporting one side of the debate in which you argue EITHER that our school system should maintain its current funding for athletic programs OR that schools should decrease the focus on athletic programs. Be sure to use information from BOTH texts in your argumentative essay.

Before you begin planning and writing, you will read two additional texts. These are the titles of the texts you will read:

- How High School Sports Save our Schools
- The Case Against High School Sports

How High School Sports Save our Schools

Education writers rarely examine high school sports, but something is happening there that might help pull our schools out of the doldrums.

In the last school year, a new national survey found that 7.7 million boys and girls took part in high school sports. This is 55.5 percent of all students, according to the report from the National Federation of State High School Associations, and the 22nd straight year that participation had increased.

Despite two major recessions and numerous threats to cut athletic budgets to save academics, high schools have found ways to not only keep sports alive but increase the number of students playing. We have data indicating sports and other extracurricular activities do better than academic classes in teaching leadership, teamwork, time management and other skills crucial for success in the workplace.

The influence of sports on girls is growing even faster. Their participation is up 63 percent in the last 20 years, compared with 31 percent for boys. Their top sport is track and field, with 475,265 participants, followed by basketball, volleyball, fast-pitch softball, soccer, cross country, tennis, swimming/diving, competitive spirit squads and lacrosse, in that order. The survey missed some small schools with about 4 percent of U.S. enrollment.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills has published a list of what it calls life and career skills, including flexibility and adaptability, productivity and accountability, leadership and responsibility. Many teens find the most congenial way to acquire such competencies is after-school activities.

A 2008 paper by Christy Lleras in the journal Social Science Research said students who participated in sports and other activities in high school earned more 10 years later, even when compared to those with similar test scores. A 2005 paper by Peter Kuhn and Catherine Weinberger in the Journal of Labor Economics found similar results for men who occupied leadership positions in high school. They cited evidence that leadership is not just a natural talent but can be learned by participating in extracurricular activities.
Students do better in activities they choose. If we provide more of them, led by committed adults, maybe even part-timers or volunteers, that can make a difference.

We know the bad news about education. Dropout rates are high. Achievement scores are stagnant. But sports participation is going up, despite pressure to cut it back. Let’s cheer about that, and look for a way to draw more students in.

Adapted from Jay Mathews, 18 September 2011, The Washington Post.

The Case Against High School Sports

The United States routinely spends more tax dollars per high-school athlete than per high-school math student—unlike most countries worldwide. And we wonder why we lag in international education rankings?

Every year, thousands of teenagers move to the United States from all over the world, for all kinds of reasons. They observe everything in their new country with fresh eyes, including basic features of American life that most of us never stop to consider.

One element of our education system consistently surprises them: “Sports are a big deal here,” says Jenny, who moved to America from South Korea with her family in 2011. Shawnee High, her public school in southern New Jersey, fields teams in 18 sports over the course of the school year, including golf and bowling. Its campus has lush grass fields, six tennis courts, and an athletic Hall of Fame. “They have days when teams dress up in Hawaiian clothes or pajamas just because—‘We’re the soccer team!’,” Jenny says.

By contrast, in South Korea, whose 15-year-olds rank fourth in the world (behind Shanghai, Singapore, and Hong Kong) on a test of critical thinking in math, Jenny’s classmates played pickup soccer on a dirt field at lunchtime. They brought badminton rackets from home and pretended there was a net. If they made it into the newspaper, it was usually for their academic accomplishments.

Sports are embedded in American schools in a way they are not almost anywhere else. Yet this difference hardly ever comes up in domestic debates about America’s international mediocrity in education. (The U.S. ranks 31st on the same international math test.) The challenges we do talk about are real ones, from undertrained teachers to entrenched poverty. But what to make of this other glaring reality, and the signal it sends to children, parents, and teachers about the very purpose of school?

In many schools, sports are so entrenched that no one—not even the people in charge—realizes their actual cost. When Marguerite Roza, the author of Educational Economics, analyzed the finances of one public high school in the Pacific Northwest, she and her colleagues found that the school was spending $328 a student for math instruction and more than four times that much for cheerleading—$1,348 a cheerleader. “And it is not even a school in a district that prioritizes cheerleading,” Roza wrote. “In fact, this district’s ‘strategic plan’ has for the past three years claimed that math was the primary focus.”

Many sports and other electives tend to have lower student-to-teacher ratios than math and reading classes, which drives up the cost. And contrary to what most people think, ticket and concession sales do not begin to cover the cost of sports in the vast majority of high schools (or colleges).

Many of the costs are insidious, Roza has found, “buried in unidentifiable places.” For example, when teacher-coaches travel for game days, schools need to hire substitute teachers. They also need to pay for buses for the team, the band, and the cheerleaders, not to mention meals and hotels on the road. For home games, schools generally cover the cost of hiring officials, providing security, painting the lines on the field, and cleaning up afterward.

That kind of constant, low-level distraction may be the greatest cost of all. During football season in particular, the focus of American principals, teachers, and students shifts inexorably away from academics. Athletics even dictate the time that school starts each day: despite research showing that later start times
Improve student performance, many high schools begin before 8 a.m., partly to reserve afternoon daylight hours for sports practice.

In many communities, the dominant argument for maintaining an emphasis on athletic programs in high schools is that sports lure students into school and keep them out of trouble—the same argument American educators have made for more than a century. And it remains relevant, without a doubt, for some small portion of students.

But at this moment in history, now that more than 20 countries are pulling off better high-school-graduation rates than we are, with mostly nominal athletic offerings, using sports to tempt kids into getting an education feels dangerously old-fashioned. America has not found a way to dramatically improve its children’s academic performance over the past 50 years, but other countries have—and they are starting to reap the economic benefits.

Imagine, for a moment, if Americans transferred our obsessive intensity about high-school sports—the rankings, the trophies, the ceremonies, the pride—to high-school academics. We would look not so different from South Korea, or Japan, or any of a handful of Asian countries whose hypercompetitive, pressure-cooker approach to academics in many ways mirrors the American approach to sports. Both approaches can be dysfunctional; both set kids up for stress and disappointment. The difference is that 93 percent of South Korean students graduate from high school, compared with just 77 percent of American students—only about 2 percent of whom receive athletic scholarships to college.

Adapted from Amanda Ripley, 8 September 2013, The Atlantic. All rights reserved.

Choose the best answer for each of the following questions.

1. What is the central idea in “How High School Sports Save our Schools”?  
   A. Athletic programs in schools are increasing achievement test scores.  
   B. The increasing participation in sports programs provides many advantages for students.  
   C. Threats to cut athletic budgets have caused an increase in participation in sports programs.  
   D. The number of girls participating in sports is increasing faster than the number of boys participating.

2. Which evidence best supports the second author’s claim that, “In many schools, sports are so entrenched that no one—not even the people in charge—realizes their actual cost”?  
   A. “Every year, thousands of teenagers move to the United States from all over the world, for all kinds of reasons.”  
   B. “If they made it into the newspaper, it was usually for their academic accomplishments.”  
   C. “For example, when teacher-coaches travel for game days, schools need to hire substitute teachers.”  
   D. “In many communities, the dominant argument for maintaining an emphasis on athletic programs in high schools is that sports lure students into school and keep them out of trouble—the same argument American educators have made for more than a century.”

3. With which of the following statements would the authors of both articles most likely agree?  
   A. The emphasis on sports programs should be decreased.  
   B. Drop out rates are too high, and student achievement is too low.  
   C. Participation in sports builds skills that are crucial for success in the workplace.  
   D. Countries that do not have strong sports programs would benefit greatly by implementing these programs.
Which author MOST successfully develops the topic according to his/her purpose using valid reasoning and relevant evidence? Use details from BOTH articles to support your answer. (2 point CR)

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Now that you have read “How High School Sports Save our Schools” and “The Case Against High School Sports,” create a plan for your argumentative essay. Weigh the claims on both sides. Think about ideas, facts, definitions, details, and other information and examples you want to use. Think about how you will introduce your topic and what the main topic will be for each paragraph. Develop your ideas clearly and use your own words, except when quoting directly from the source texts. Be sure to identify the sources by title or number when using details or facts directly from the sources.

Write your argumentative essay in your own words, supporting one side of the debate in which you argue EITHER that our school system should maintain its current funding for athletic programs OR that schools should decrease the focus on athletic programs. Be sure to use information from BOTH texts in your argumentative essay.

Now write your argumentative essay. Be sure to:

☐ Introduce your claim.
☐ Support your claim with logical reasoning and relevant evidence from the texts.
☐ Acknowledge and address alternate or opposing claims.
☐ Organize the reasons and evidence logically.
☐ Use words, phrases, and clauses to connect your ideas and to clarify the relationships among claims, counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.
☐ Establish and maintain a formal style.
☐ Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.
☐ Check your work for correct grammar, usage, capitalization, spelling, and punctuation.