

NEW ZEALAND SECONDARY SCHOOLS SPORTS COUNCIL INCORPORATED

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Sport for young people 13 – 18 years. 'The role of secondary schools'

The sporting environment for young people at secondary school

New Zealand is, arguably, fortunate that the sporting experiences for young people aged 13 to 18 years, at most age and ability levels and for most codes, are centred on its secondary schools. The major reasons for this historical position are the proven capabilities of secondary schools and, more especially their teachers, to offer quality sports opportunities and through the acceptance, by National Sporting Organisations [NSOs], that school based sport is important to their code for both participation and performance outcomes.

The capability of schools and, subsequently, the acceptance by NSOs has been based on

- the sporting expertise and professional management skills of the schools' teaching staff and, increasingly, of others from the community that schools may enlist,
- the willingness and ability of these people to volunteer their services and
- the decisions of school principals and Boards of Trustees to commit substantial resources to this part of their schools' wider educational programme.

These are discretionary resources; sports provision in schools, as with any such activity, is affected by internal and external factors that, at one time, may enrich it and, at another time, may threaten its very existence.

External factors are often beyond the control of sports administrators who are forced to respond in any way they can. But there are also some elements within sport that are not helpful if the intended outcome is the best possible sporting environment for young people. These should be able to be managed by those who provide sport for young people; it is an area that could be improved and it is a primary focus in this paper.

A significant factor in the provision of sport for young people is the presence of competent, caring adult leadership. Competent, caring adult leadership has the capacity to establish a culture in sport that will eliminate many of the counter-productive factors that are described in this paper.

But adults can also elect, deliberately or by omission, not to act as competent, caring adult leaders in sport; indeed, young people's sport seems to produce more than its share of normally reasonable people turning into unreasoning zealots so that principles that might sensibly be agreed become clouded by personalities and intransigence. This position is more likely to occur when there is lack of clarity on the desired courses of action. For this reason, New Zealand Secondary Schools Sports Council believes that it would be helpful to work towards agreed understandings between all sport providers who offer sporting opportunities to young people.

Recommendation 1:

That, in order to create sporting environments that best meet the varying abilities and interests of young people, Sparc prepares a discussion document outlining protocols and guidelines that could be agreed by all providers of sporting opportunities for young people.

Some of the issues

A. Definition of Sport

There is a confused perception, apparently growing among those who comment on sport for young people, that the word 'sport' is restricted to those seeking high performance and that lower levels of competitive involvement are, somehow, not sport. It seems that, for some, there is a distinction between 'sport' and 'non-competitive (sic) sporting activities'.

This is particularly unhelpful when young people are involved because many of them do not see themselves as being 'A' team aspirants yet they would definitely see themselves as playing sport; clearly, in our opinion at least, a school with 34 Netball teams has 34 teams playing the 'sport' and a group of students who form a team amongst themselves to play indoor cricket, with no intention of training or practising, are playing 'sport'. It is important that these students are identified as sports participants, not least by themselves and by those who provide the opportunities for them but also by others who look on at what they do.

Recommendation 2:

*That the following definition be adopted:
'Sport' is a physical activity that is governed by rules and engaged by participants in varying degrees of competition.*

B. Should secondary schools offer sports programmes?

Schools, grappling with the demands of the ever-changing curriculum, the expectations of a vibrant society and a diminishing real budget are, quite clearly, asking questions about what they should be providing [or what they are capable

of providing] for their students. The answers to these questions could result, in some schools at least, in sport being a casualty, however much this might be regretted. There will be a reduced chance of this happening if those participating in any debate are well informed about the benefits of sport to young people and to society and if they are aware of what may be lost if the community is not able to pick up what they might be considering dropping. In this, as in many other matters, schools should see themselves as central hubs of their community.

We note four key learning outcomes in a recent discussion paper that describes a vision for the future of secondary education:

“Successful students in 2026 will have:

- the capacity to learn*
- the capacity to participate in a future society*
- the capacity to be part of the New Zealand tradition*
- the capacity to value self and others.”¹*

It should not be too difficult to present ‘sport’ as a vehicle for the achievement of at least one of those learning outcomes. Those who believe that quality sport has the capacity to bring significant societal benefits to need to be on the front foot to allow the chance of its widest potential for good being realised.

Recommendation 3:

That, inter alia, the discussion document referred to in Recommendation 1. seek answers to the following questions:

- Do New Zealanders want secondary schools to continue to provide sport or to opt out of sports provision?*
- Do New Zealand sporting bodies want secondary schools to continue to provide sport or to opt out of sports provision?*
- Do New Zealand educationalists, [BoTs, principals, teachers and officials], want secondary schools to continue to provide sport or to opt out of sports provision?*
- Do New Zealand students want secondary schools to continue to provide sport or to opt out of sports provision?*
- If schools were to opt out of sports provision, for whatever reason, could local community organisations fill the gap and provide comparable sporting activities for its young people?*
 - [If yes, it is easily argued that we have not lost the most important element, high quality sporting activities, at a variety of competition levels, for young people.]*
- If the answer above is no, what will be lost in addition to the loss of the high quality sporting activities for young people?*

¹ Secondary Futures, “*Students First*”, p6.

C. School or club?

If it is accepted that, as now, schools will offer sports in their programmes, there will continue to be occasions when there is conflict between schools and clubs for the sporting participation of students who attend secondary schools. These occasions are, fortunately, rare but each one, more often than not, results in tensions that are unfortunate. Worse, they will often produce an outcome that will ignore the best interests of the young person and that may be far removed from what was originally intended by any of the parties involved.

In addition to the harm created by wrestling over individual athletes there is a no less serious threat to the provision of sport for young people. Where there is a finite resource [e.g. 15 students attending a secondary school and who want to play hockey] and there are competing parties for their skills, unless one of the parties is much the stronger, or the parties come to some agreement, or luck intervenes, there is a real chance that, with insufficient players in any one organisation to form a team, none of the 15 potential hockey players will be able to play their preferred sport.

Recommendations 4 (i) to 4 (ix):

That,

- i) for most secondary school students, a school setting be the primary setting for sporting opportunities **in team sports**,*
- ii) a secondary school providing an opportunity for a student to compete in sport in a regular [e.g. weekly] sporting competition have first call on the student as long as the school offers a level of involvement/competition/quality that allows the optimum sporting and social development of the student,*
- iii) notwithstanding the significance of traditional school sporting events such as school, regional and national athletics and swimming sports, for most secondary school students, a community [club] or family setting be the primary setting for sporting opportunities in **sports that are based on individual**, as distinct from team, **performance** [for example and not exclusively, track and field, swimming, skiing, cycling, golf, kart sport, shooting, bowls, equestrian],*
- iv) where a school is not able to or does not choose to provide appropriate opportunities for its students to compete in some or any, individual or team, sporting competitions, the school assists its students to communicate with and play for local community club[s] and provides all reasonable access to students for the community club[s],*

- v) *a school provide appropriate recognition of students who excel in sports, including those that are based in the community, and, for those events that are available, encourages participation in school regional or national competitions in codes that are more traditionally centred in a community setting [e.g. athletic/swimming sports],*
- vi) *a school provide school leavers with advice and guidance about their community sport and physical activity options,*
- vii) *a school and local or regional community associations/clubs ensure that they work together to offer sporting opportunities of the highest quality for the young people in their shared community,*
- viii) *a school and local or regional community associations/clubs make all reasonable efforts to accommodate what could otherwise be competing commitments on young people [e.g. representative and school commitments, competition scheduling, summer/winter and winter/summer transitions],*
- ix) *a school and local or regional community associations/clubs communicate regularly to ensure that they are jointly meeting agreed obligations.*

D. One size won't fit all

It is acknowledged that any agreed national protocol or guidelines will not be capable of covering all situations. If there is acceptance of the principle that each young person's individual sporting development is of major [paramount?] importance, a place will need to be found for mechanisms that accommodate situations, individual, group and regional, that are different from the norm.

Recommendation 5:

That agreed protocols and guidelines contain discretionary clauses with the intention of providing, on a case-by-case basis, opportunity for the sporting needs of all students to be met.

e.g.

- i) *provisions are in place to allow a student to apply to the school for a dispensation to play in a setting other than the school. This provision is available to all students; however it is a particularly important consideration for talented players and for those whose athletic development would not be best served by staying in the school environment. The school agrees that there will be occasions when the teams that it is able to field in any sporting code may not cater for the specific sports development needs of a student and agrees that it will*

allow dispensations if it accepts that a student's best needs are met elsewhere.

- ii) *in the event of disagreement between the school and a student over a claim by the latter that the school does not provide a suitable level of competition in a sporting code that it offers and, based on this factor alone, the student wants to play in a community setting, there are appropriate systems in place for the matter to be handled quickly and objectively. These are likely, in the first instance, to involve the relevant local association [RSO]; they will consider the needs of the student as paramount and they should be binding on the school, the community club and the student. If there is still no agreement reached between the parties, the matter will be referred to the national sports organisation that is encouraged to involve NZSSSC.*

E. Inconsistencies within codes and between schools

There may be discord through the various levels of administration within a sport or between schools. What the NSO accepts as a guiding principle may or may not be agreed by its regional bodies and may, even more liberally, be interpreted or ignored by the local clubs. Similarly, individual schools may approve practices that are at odds with what schools collectively have agreed as national guidelines.

Recommendation 6:

That the protocols/guidelines, that will be agreed by all providers of sporting opportunities for young people, include clearly described Codes of Conduct that will apply through sporting codes and through secondary schools.

F. Varied and changing capabilities of event providers

Many NSOs and RSOs are well capable and enthusiastically prepared to do whatever is necessary to ensure that young people in secondary schools receive the highest quality sporting opportunities within a school setting; others are less capable and/or such provision is not a priority for them. Where each code positions itself here is not necessarily a function of size and dollars. Nor is it constant over time.

There is a history, at both national and regional levels, of school-based sports administrators assisting NSOs and RSOs to present the highest quality product. There is also a history of school-based sports administrators becoming frustrated by the lack of commitment of some NSOs and RSOs and, as a result, setting up their own administrations to offer codes that they believe are being poorly served by the relevant NSO/RSO. Uncertainties and inefficiencies may be created when what should have been short-term interventions become entrenched and are perceived, by the school-based administrators themselves or by others, as the optimal form of administration for the code.

Recommendation 7:

That the 'sport owns sport' principle be re-affirmed to make it clear that the responsibility for the development of a sport, at this level as at others, is placed firmly with those who are the guardians of the heritage of the code.

Recommendation 8:

That, without any diminution of the clarity of the principle in Recommendation 7, NSOs and RSOs be encouraged to establish partnerships or relationships with 'Youth Committees' or 'Junior Advisory Boards' or similar. These may include formally constituted 'teacher associations', regional secondary school sports offices or informal groups of teacher volunteers. The recommendation acknowledges the benefits to be gained by enlisting the volunteer support and the expertise that is available from people willing to assist NSOs and RSOs in the presentation of the highest quality sporting experiences for young people.

Recommendation 9:

That, where the NSO or RSO is not capable of or not interested in the provision of high quality sporting opportunities for secondary school teams or individuals, teacher associations, regional secondary school sports offices or informal groups of teacher volunteers be given every encouragement if they wish to provide those opportunities until such time as the NSO/RSO demonstrates appropriate capability and interest. When/if this stage is reached Recommendations 7 & 8 will apply.

G. Diminishing involvement of school-based coaches/officials/managers

There is evidence of a decreasing involvement by secondary school teachers in providing sport for students. Involvement in sporting and physical activity programmes by teaching staff (as with other community members) is a voluntary contribution to the education of young people and it is confronted by a host of challenges. Not only do the issues of workload and increasing age reduce the scale of the offering from those teachers who are involved, but also, young teachers emerging from the teacher training institutions are not replacing those who have been heavily committed over many years.

But, before it is accepted as a given that there will be fewer teachers involved in providing sport for young people, it is important to question whether or not those who promote sports participation have done all that is possible to present, to

education policy decision makers, the wider benefits brought through the involvement, by young people, in regular, quality sports and physical activity.

H. The role of Sport in health promotion

Reducing levels of physical skill competencies and, not unrelated to this, increasing concerns about diet and weight management are major concerns. Obesity and its associated health risk factors have rapidly become recognised as global issues of epidemic proportions with governments being pressured into interventions that are afforded high priority and high levels of funding.

In seeking successful interventions, there may be a temptation to accept that what is on offer currently has failed and to look only at new interventions that will be attractive to young people. Sound research and clever thinking will certainly devise new activities that are in tune with the needs of young people today. Sound research and clever thinking will also, however, recognise that sports and sporting activities, presented in formats that match the varied ability and interest levels of young people, still offer an approachable, often appealing avenue for young people to be involved in physical activity and, by this involvement, to be encouraged to consider the implications of healthy diet and sufficient exercise.

The potential for quality sporting opportunities to achieve desired health promotion goals, or, for that matter, any other goals, is limited by its reach. We believe that the decisive factor in the extent of the 'reach' in this context is not that we have arrived at the point where all young people who are likely to be attracted to or 'captured' by sport have been catered for but that we have not had the chance to arrive at that point because of the lack of sufficient 'competent, caring adults'.

The issue and its solution can be found in the basic laws of supply and demand. The shortage of the supply of coaches, managers and officials has diminished and, in some cases, denied the demands, overt and covert, of young people for sport. This could change, or it could be changed but it requires new thinking.

Recommendations 10 (i) to 10 (v):

That

- i) Sparc, with the assistance of relevant agencies, including the Ministries of Education and Health, other government agencies and NZSSSC, prepare a paper on the individual and societal benefits to be gained by the involvement of young people in quality sporting activities;*
- ii) this paper be the basis for a revaluation, by education authorities including those in teacher training institutions, of*
 - the status of sport in the secondary school curricular and co-curricular programmes and*

- *whether or not sport is reaching its potential in building key physical competencies, positive attitudes to healthy lifestyles, and social capital and*
 - *whether or not education through sport receives the level of servicing that is considered to be appropriate to allow achievable education outcomes to be reached;*
- iii) *in the context of the findings of the revaluation above, a range of measures, designed to encourage involvement by, to coin a phrase, 'more teachers, more often,' be researched and implemented and*
 - iv) *again in the above context, a review of the time allocations and teaching practices related to sports education in teacher training institutions be conducted and consequential changes implemented ;*
 - v) *the significance of the role of secondary schools sports co-ordinators be reviewed and re-stated;*
 - vi) *the professional development needs of secondary schools sports co-ordinators be supported by the promotion and enhancement of the Sfrito 'Professional Development System [PDS] or similar training opportunities.*

I. Rural and remote communities

For several years there have been growing concerns about the difficulties faced by rural communities. For New Zealand's major sports, most of these communities have to cope with small numbers and a difficulty in fielding teams; many of them are considerably distant from main centres where most of the better facilities are located; this adds time and financial difficulties for support personnel in getting their students to sporting events and it brings a real concern that they and their students will, sooner or later, become disenchanting.

Recommendation 11:

That Sparc continue to seek ways to assist the sporting involvement of young people who are living in remote, rural communities where small and decreasing numbers of participants and large and increasing travel distances are contributing to provide exceptional difficulties for those seeking sporting involvements. This investigation and any interventions that result will involve the full range of relevant sector agencies.

The Good News: Best, at least, Really, Really Good Practice

While a major aim of this paper is to prompt discussion on sporting provision for young people in secondary schools and the paper focuses on some difficult matters, the number and scope of which may appear to be depressingly large, we are constantly reminded of and excited by some outstanding work that is currently being performed in schools.

Consideration of these individual case studies provides compelling evidence that some of the major issues that have been identified here are already being expertly addressed in a sample of schools. What has been successful in these schools and the way the outcomes were achieved can be used as models for others. We believe that it is important that such work be acknowledged, that it be added to the collective intelligence on school sport in the community and that it be promoted across all sectors.

A personal brainstorming several moments produced examples such as the following; there will be many similar:

Awatapu College – *Walking Group*
East Coast Region ‘*Sport on the Move*’
Hillcrest High School, Wellington College & Otago Boys’ High School - *clubs*
Onehunga High School – *Push Play*
St Catherine’s College - *Basketball team*
Tauranga Boys’ College - *Titans*
Waimea College – *Sports leadership in Senior PE*

others, others, others.....

Recommendation 12:

That NZSSSC prepare a document of ‘good practice’ and provide this to Sparc, so that it can be made widely available to all schools, national and regional sports bodies, government agencies, local authorities, Members of Parliament and, not least, the media.