

Are Extracurricular Activities the Secret Weapon of American Schools? (extracted from the Marshall Memo)

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Mike Petrilli argues that extracurricular activities in American schools explain the fact that, despite our students' mediocre test-score performance on international comparisons, U.S. economic growth is still impressive. "That's right," says Petrilli, "Our athletic programs, student councils, debate clubs, school newspapers, orchestras, theater troupes, Future Farmers of America, [Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, church youth groups], and the rest of the panoply of after-school activities might be boosting America's economic output. While Asian kids are cramming at 'exam cram schools' and European youngsters are smoking Gitanes in sidewalk cafes, our students are engaged in activities that give them the confidence to achieve in myriad ways – a taste of achievement they then carry into the world of work."

There isn't much research to support this theory, admits Petrilli, but he points to indirect evidence that extracurricular activities correlate with stronger social self-concept and increased cultural capital. "This is no secret," he writes; "It's why elite colleges want to see extracurricular activities on applicants' resumes – fueling an extracurricular arms race in some elite high schools."

As further proof, Petrilli asks us to conduct a thought experiment. "Think of the skills you use on a daily basis in your job... Now ponder: back in high school, did you get to practice these skills more often during class time or during extracurricular activities? I strongly suspect it was the latter." Here's his list:

- Setting goals and working toward them
- Collaborating with colleagues
- Speaking publicly
- Organizing time effectively
- Designing and leading projects and project teams
- Listening to the concerns of others
- Competing against other organizations
- Juggling multiple duties.

All the more reason not to cut extracurricular activities in lean budget times, concludes Petrilli. And all the more reason for small schools, which can't afford as many extras, to team up with other schools or universities to make sure students have access to the broadest possible range of enriching choices.

"The Genius of American Education" by Mike Petrilli in *The Education Gadfly*, July 17, 2008 (Vol. 8, #27, p. 2-4) <http://www.edexcellence.net/gadfly/index.cfm>