

## ***The Benefits of Hockey and Organized Youth Sports – A Call to Action***

**Michael A. Kanters, Ph.D.  
North Carolina State University**

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### **Hockey, Sports, and Academic Achievement**

First, I want to thank Congressman Quigley for inviting me to participate in this staff briefing. I also want to recognize the members of the Congressional Hockey Caucus for their dedication to expanding hockey programs across America: especially to disadvantaged and disabled youth. In light of the many challenges our nation is currently facing and the incredible demands on your time, I want express my gratitude for your efforts to acknowledge the value of hockey and its importance to our children.

I've been asked to focus my comments today on the relationship between hockey participation and academic achievement. Although there is fairly strong evidence that participation in organized sports has been associated with positive educational outcomes, the unique benefits of hockey have yet to be identified. However, playing sports does seem to make better students. For example, sport participants generally like school better than non-participants, they are more likely to attend and graduate from college, and have higher GPAs. For girls, the benefits of sports participation are even more striking. Girls who play sports are not only less likely to be involved in an unintended pregnancy, but they have higher levels of confidence and self-esteem, as well as higher grades than non-sport participants. Sport involvement also appears to be a predictor of future success with 80 percent of female executives at Fortune 500 companies identifying themselves as former "tomboys" – having played sports.

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One prevailing explanation for these outcomes is the link between playing sports, identity formation, and membership in a sports subculture. For example, playing youth hockey shapes a child's definition of him or herself as both an athlete and a member of a sports subculture. For example, when someone asks my 12 year old son to describe himself, he usually starts with "I'm a hockey player." This identity and its characteristics shape the choices children make and guide their journey through adolescence. The influence of coaches, parents, and teammates not only promote positive performance in sport but in academics as well as other life domains. That doesn't happen by chance. Deliberate strategies by both coaches and parents are important to achieve these positive outcomes.

### **A Cultural Shift in Youth Sports**

Although hockey and other sports have the capacity to positively impact children's lives, over the past 30 years we have witnessed a cultural shift in the structure and delivery of youth sports in America. This shift has undermined the full array of benefits for those privileged enough to play sports and has prevented thousands, if not millions, of children from ever having the opportunity to even play.

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When Luther Gulick first introduced sports into the New York City school system in 1903 (the birth of organized sports in America), his intent was to use sports as a way to channel youthful energies in a manageable format. Sports were seen as a way to teach children from all walks of life how to work together productively while learning the skills for an active and healthy lifestyle. Industry leaders, politicians, and the emerging professional sport leagues loved the program. By 1917, 17 other cities had formed athletic leagues for children in high school down through elementary school. Gulick even included fitness competitions designed to encourage the least talented children to participate in athletics. What resulted was an adaptation of children's games into a successful public health initiative.

Unfortunately, within 10 years of Gulick's death, the focus of organized sports began to shift from a 'sport for all' philosophy to one that coalesced around the best athletes. With each

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passing year, organized sports for children have strayed further and further from their core mission of providing healthy, safe, and character-building recreation for our nation's youth. Sport programs that had once been run by trained physical activity and child development professionals are now controlled by organizations that rely on parent volunteers to serve as coaches and league administrators.

The hazards of recruiting parents into children's playing arenas is that adults have different needs, they're untrained and often don't have the skills to teach or coach children's sports. The result has been a professionalization of youth sports where bigger is better and children are pressured to practice more frequently and specialize at an early age – often at the expense of other sports and activities. Talented players are quickly assigned to highly competitive travel teams with incredible price tags and even more demanding schedules. Less skilled players are relegated to the less competitive recreational leagues where practices are poorly organized and fail to provide children with age appropriate skill development or appropriate amounts of physical activity. Participants are often seen watching the drills being demonstrated or standing in line waiting for their turn to practice a particular drill. A recent study in the Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine reported that only 25% of youth in their study obtained the recommended 60 minutes of MVPA during sport practices. The professionalization of youth sport has also alienated significant proportions of children from both low income and racial minority families, accentuating the health disparities of these at risk populations. It seems clear that Gulick's vision for youth sports in America has gone astray.

### **A Call to Action**

With an estimated 44 million youth participating in organized sports, the time has come to take a more proactive stance on both the structure and delivery of sports across the country. A good starting point is to listen to what our children want from sport. First, they want sports to be fun! They want to be active, especially when that activity leads to scoring. They want to be personally involved in the action. They want challenging and exciting experiences and they want to make friends (especially for girls).

*children want sports to be fun, active, challenging, and social*

One national sport governing body that is working to turn back the clock on organized sport is USA Hockey. With 60% of hockey players dropping out before they turn 12 and 20% dropping out after one season, USA Hockey identified a problem in the way they were teaching and coaching hockey. The American Development Model launched by USA Hockey in 2010 represents a cultural shift back to the days of Luther Gulick and the old Public School Athletic

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Leagues. It emphasizes a child first philosophy that allows kids to be kids and to get the most out of hockey without feeling like they need to be the next superstar. It encourages children to play multiple sports and emphasizes age appropriate training with a low priority placed on winning or losing.

The NHL's *Hockey is For Everyone* initiative is another shining example of how sport, delivered in an inclusive athlete centered environment, combined with life skills lessons can profoundly impact the lives of children. The sport-based positive youth development principles of *Hockey is For Everyone* should serve as a model for all sports.

Hockey, like all sports, is filled with so much potential that, despite our best efforts over the past 30 years to diminish its full potential, it continues to positively change the lives of children. Our children are more active, more focused, better educated, and will become better citizens because of organized sports. However, instead of using children's sport as arenas to entertain over-involved parents we need to think of sport as an environment that gives our children positive life experiences, physical activity, and the skills for a lifetime of active living and productive citizenship.

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Contact Information: Michael A. Kanters, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism Management  
Campus Box 8004  
NC State University  
Raleigh, NC 27695-8004  
919,513.0279  
[mkanters@ncsu.edu](mailto:mkanters@ncsu.edu)

**Michael A. Kanters, Ph.D.**  
**Associate Professor**  
**Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism Management**  
**NC State University**

**Biographical Statement**

Michael Kanters is an Associate Professor in the Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism Management at NC State University. He received his Masters of Science in Parks & Recreation Management and Ph.D. in Human Performance from Indiana University. Prior to joining the faculty at NC State University, Dr. Kanters served as the Executive Director of the Indiana Parks & Recreation Association, and was an Assistant Professor at Western Illinois University and Brock University in Canada. Dr. Kanters' research focuses on factors associated with the youth sport experience. He has published over 45 articles in peer-reviewed journals, has made over 60 presentations at research conferences, and has acquired over \$1,000,000 in external research funding. Some of Dr. Kanters most recent work, funded by the Active Living Research Center for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, examines sport participation in Middle school, the association between school sports and physical activity, and the joint-use of school sport facilities with community partners. His research also focuses on the benefits of sport participation among youth and its potential to foster positive youth development. Dr. Kanters has been a hockey player his entire life and continues to play and volunteer as a youth hockey coach. He also plays an integral role in the development and coordination of North Carolina's Hockey is For Everyone program in partnership with the Boys & Girls Clubs and the Carolina Hurricanes.

Contact Information: Michael A. Kanters, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism Management  
Campus Box 8004  
NC State University  
Raleigh, NC 27695-8004  
919.513.0279 (Work)  
919.427.3586 (Cell)  
mkanters@ncsu.edu