



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

YOUTH VIOLENCE

Violins (not violence) in schools

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The positive impact of the Play Ball initiative on the scholastic performance of youngsters in Boston's middle schools ([see Globe story](#)) is stunning, but hardly surprising. For too many years, we have over-emphasized standardized test scores -- treating them as the gold standard, if not the only standard, for assessing quality in education -- at the expense of other areas of physical, emotional and intellectual development.

While no one will deny the supreme importance of the basic subjects -- English, math and science. But a focus on test scores over all else places academically marginal students at-risk to skip school and ultimately leave school altogether. And the effects on truancy and drop-out on delinquency are obvious.

The results of Play Ball clearly demonstrate the many lessons that athletic participation can offer concerning cooperation and responsibility to a group. Youngsters who are constantly challenged and frustrated by traditional academics can derive both enjoyment and a sense of self-worth on the athletic field, giving them a reason to get up and out to school in the morning.

But let's not forget the other extra-curricular areas -- for example, art, drama, and music. We need violins in schools (as opposed to violence). These pursuits can also be of great value for youngsters who struggle athletically and are seeking an alternative niche, purpose and direction. The back to basics movement has assigned these subjects second-tier status; when trimming budgets they are often viewed as expendable frills.

Years ago I served on the U.S. Department of Education Expert Panel on Safe, Disciplined and Drug Free Schools. It was our responsibility to identify exemplary and promising programs that were worthy of federal support. But along came a *Los Angeles Times* [expose](#) about how these drug and violence prevention funds were being misallocated, spent on initiatives that had nothing to do with violence or drugs.

One example singled out by the *Times* was a small grant (\$1,000) awarded to a teacher in Utah who had purchased fishing gear -- rods, reels and tackle -- in order to take selected group of 33 students on a fishing trip. The teacher, who was donating his time, felt that this could provide a tremendous bonding experience for kids in need of mentoring. He was right and the *Times* missed the boat.

So Play Ball is great, but so is Go Fish and other enriching experiences where youngsters can learn positive lessons from dedicated adults that go beyond the ABCs, the multiplication table, and $E=MC^2$.