

## American Sports Institute's PASS Program and Planned Arete School

Another noteworthy model and exciting vision for an engaging private school education comes from the American Sports Institute in Marin County, California (or ASI; see [www.amersports.org](http://www.amersports.org)). ASI is a nonprofit organization that uses “positive aspects of sport culture” to address personal, social, and international concerns, especially problems in the public schools. ASI takes as a starting point statistics suggesting that shortcomings in academics, health, and fitness among children and adolescents have developed into a modern day crisis. A multitude of warning signs include less than 45% proficiency rates in science, social studies, math, and English according to CA STAR test results; a significant ethnic graduation gap in California; increasing apathy, boredom, and lack of motivation for academics as students move through the school system; growing, epidemic proportions of childhood overweight and obesity, predisposing millions to diabetes, heart disease, and cancer, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds; and less than 25 % of fifth to ninth grade students meeting minimal fitness standards. ASI founder, Joel Kirsch, asserts that the inescapable conclusion is that *there is something fundamentally wrong with the core of the nation's educational system*. For Kirsch and ASI, the question goes back to: Why do so many students love sports but dread school?

Certainly, those who cherish athletic experience know that there is something special about it. ASI's vision for a private school model described below evolved from an innovative program it developed in the public schools based on a model of sports participation called the PASS program (Promoting Achievement in School through Sport). Implemented in 28 middle and high schools primarily in California and Illinois, PASS is a daily, yearlong academic course in which middle and high school students learn how to improve their grades, behavior, self-esteem, and physical performance. In the course, students develop a set of individualized academic and physical goals, and then apply positive aspects of sports culture to achieve them. The positive aspects of sports culture include: (a) self-paced learning (just like athletes, being allowed to developing skills at one's own pace), (b) mastery-based learning (putting forth one's best effort to reach learning and other goals, and moving on to the next level or goal only after mastering the present skill), (c) relevance (knowing the reasons for working on a topic, and developing an intrinsic

interest in it), (d) active engagement (as with sports, except applied to learning process), (e) coaching methodology (all instructors will be called “coaches,” whose role is to demonstrate, monitor while students practice, and provide feedback in a self-paced learning environment), (f) performance learning (in which students must frequently demonstrate their skills in a variety of ways to a variety of audiences), (g) team-oriented learning (contributing the success of one’s group as well as one’s individual success, and thus being responsible for peer’s performance as well as one’s own), (h) character development (including *Fundamentals of Athletic Mastery* such as concentration, balance, relaxation, power, and rhythm), and (i) project-based, team learning (completing comprehensive projects in teams relying on interdisciplinary fields of study).

An outside evaluation of the PASS program concluded that it helped participating students to achieve academically—particularly those interested in sports (Griffin 1997). No studies have yet measured the quality of experience of students participating in PASS with the ESM; however, McCombs and Lauer (2002) assessed the PASS program for its alignment with APA Learner-Centered Principles and outcomes. On almost all measures of learner-centered practices, PASS teachers met or exceeded standards established by learner-centered models of excellence. In turn, students of PASS met or exceeded guidelines for motivation and learning such as the development of self-efficacy, epistemic curiosity, and task mastery goals. In addition, evaluation research conducted by the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL), one of ten research centers administered by the US Department of Education’s Office of Educational Research and Improvement, concluded, “PASS addresses the needs of the whole learner—intellectual needs, motivational needs, and other needs such as students physical and social needs....making it a model for total school reform” (American Sports Institute 2011).

Due to the success of the model for total school reform, in 2002 Kirsch and the American Sports Institute were invited to make a 2 h presentation at a hearing before the California State Assembly Education Committee at the State Capital in Sacramento. Several state Senators also sat in on the hearing to address topics of health and physical education, sport culture, states of consciousness as it relates to how students learn best. At Dr. Kirsch’s invitation, I had the honor of presenting research evidence about flow states and engagement in the classroom, along with George Leonard, ASI Director and president of Esalen Institute, and Barbara McCombs of the University of Denver Research Institute. The California Legislature was sympathetic to Kirsh’s plea about widespread student disengagement in the state of California and how students might be both healthier and more motivated if only schools were more like sports. They stated that if Kirsch could show that his vision for education based on sports culture could “work” in a whole-school setting, they would consider it as a model of reform for education in California.

Taking the Legislature up on its offer, ASI is now in the development phase of applying the model to a whole school, called the *Arete School of Sport Culture and Wellness* in San Rafael, California. Arete is defined as “A continuous striving for excellence in an integrated and balanced physical, mental, and spiritual way” (American Sports Institute 2011). The goal of the pre-K-12 Arete School is to use

positive aspects of sports culture to enable students to achieve high academic and health and fitness levels, as well as a passion for learning. It will be designed specifically to value and attend to the needs of the whole child—physical, social, emotional, and cognitive—and to obtain the results found to be lacking in public schools. The school will be philosophically based on two themes—sport culture and wellness—through a balanced and integrated approach to the arts, humanities, sciences and minimal proficiency in both English and Spanish.

Provided with a curriculum that is designed to be engaging, relevant, and challenging in a safe and nurturing learning environment, students will be encouraged to pursue activities that they love, perform at a high level (like professional athletes), and reach their full potential. Curricular offerings will include Language Arts and International Languages, Life and Physical Sciences, Math, Performing and Fine Arts, Social Sciences, and Physical Education including Yoga, Tai Chi, Aikido, and Strength and Flexibility Conditioning. Students will also be accountable for their ABCs: Aerobic capacity; Blood pressure, blood sugar, and body composition; and Cholesterol level. In addition to achieving mastery in reading, writing, math, and public speaking, equally important (but less common) competencies targeted include the ability to: work and play; use technology; work independently and with others; be healthy and fit; practice physical coordination and flexibility; respect one's personal, social, and natural environment; experience a sense of place and local, regional, national, and international belonging; demonstrate patience, perseverance, humility, and other important character attributes; and most of all, love learning.

A model for extended learning time, the school would be open from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. year round in 12–16 week intervals, with 2–6 week breaks in between in which the school would remain open for less structured projects and volunteer work. Because the daily schedule provides ample time to complete all work at school, no homework is assigned. The Arete School believes that it is important for children to enjoy what time they have with their families; in turn, parental and community involvement would be integral to running the school (American Sports Institute 2011). Parents would be invited to visit any time, as well as required to have regular meetings with school staff and contribute to the school's operations.

Have you ever noticed the incredibly high degree of expertise and knowledge professional baseball players and coaches have at their disposal for nearly every situation they confront on the field, as is true in all professional sports? For example, pitchers know relative percentages of success for each pitch type and strike zone target for each batter they face, and similarly, the batting team has an intimate knowledge of the probability of given outcomes for each type of play they can attempt. The Arete School is based on the premise that if there were only a small fraction of money and attention that society invested into the profession of teaching as the profession of sports, such that teachers and students showed up to give their best performance every time they stepped into the classroom, we would likely begin the process of getting instruction down to a science much as we have done for baseball over the past hundred years. Of course, society would need to value education at the same level as professional sports, and the type of research as described in

Chaps. 6 and 7 would need to be more fully developed, neither of which would be an easy feat, but the Arete School hopes to take as step in that direction.

At first, Kirsch set out to create a charter school based on the principles of sports culture. However, soon he learned that even charter schools were too beholden to public school testing and other requirements to implement a radical departure from public education (in fact, on average, charter schools in California perform no better academically than public schools). At the same time, two criteria would be essential if it were to be truly useful as a model for future public education: (1) the student population (and staff) must be similar to that of public schools, which, for Northern California means that 40 % of all students must come from low-income, minority families, most of which will be Latino; and (2) the school would not have the financial advantages of a private school from high-priced tuition. The solution was a private school operating *as if it were a public school* in terms of being tuition-free and open to all students (with selections made through a lottery system as necessary). Because it will say, “No, thank you” to public funds in order to be free of all governmental regulations, however, it will be funded through private sources including foundations, individuals, parents, alumni, and the general public through special events (see American Sports Institute 2011).

The school will be continually engaged in research in order to evaluate the school’s effectiveness and make needed improvements. To create awareness about what ASI does in order to complete the mission of serving as a model for the public school system in California, The Arete School will use internal and external research studies as resources to conduct workshops, seminars, presentations, conferences, and symposia, reporting regularly to members of the California Legislature. Eventually, the Arte School will become a certified, public school, teacher training institution (American Sports Institute 2011). Ultimately, the Arete School hopes to be a model not just for reforming schools, but for transforming them into places that, just like the athletic field, individuals come to be engaged in activities that they enjoy, demonstrate their signature character strengths, perform at their highest levels, and show care and concern for others—that is, places where they come to be in flow.