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Customer-Based Execution & Strategy



# SPORTS OR ACADEMICS: SHARPEN YOUR DISTRICT'S FOCUS WITH THE RIGHT STRATEGIC CHOICE

## ACHIEVING CUSTOMER FOCUS AT SCHOOL DISTRICTS

*“Our community really values sports. As a student I benefitted from sports. So, we are going to emphasize sports, because it is the best way to attract new families.”*

- Principal of an underperforming middle school

*“As part of strategy planning, we listened to hundreds of students, parents, and community members. Sports was mentioned many times – sports brings the community together, teaches students discipline, and creates a whole child.”*

- Superintendent of an urban school district

## Sports and Academics in K-12 School Districts

Many public-school leaders and school-district executives strongly believe that focusing on sports will help differentiate their school from competitors. They believe a strong sports program can help them gain and retain families that may otherwise defect to competitors.

School leaders perennially cite complaining parents as their rationale to promote sports over academics. When some parents constantly harangue school leaders with a demand for sports, should school leaders invest in sports to appease them?

Setting strategy based on the few, but vocal parents can be misleading.

## C-CUBES-K12™ Parent Voice Study: 2022

The Parent Voice Study is based on parents residing in the U.S., are 18 years of age, and currently have a child in school.

### Survey Administration

Results are based on a national sample of 5,924 parents who completed an online survey in November-December 2022. The survey uses proprietary items to measure their student’s school and educational experience.

### Methodology

This report analyzes two items rated as: completely disagree=1, somewhat disagree=2, neither agree/nor disagree=3, somewhat agree=4, completely agree=5.

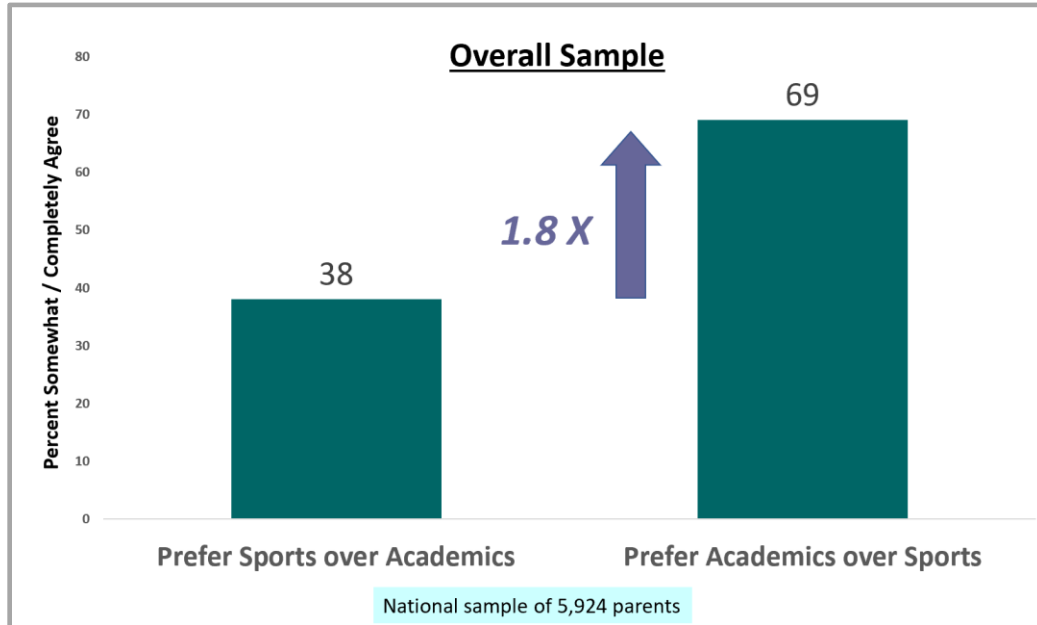
**Prefer Sports over Academics:** *I prefer a school that has a strong sports-program even if it is weak in academics*

**Prefer Academics over Sports:** *I prefer a school that has strong academics even if it has a weak sports-program*

## Results

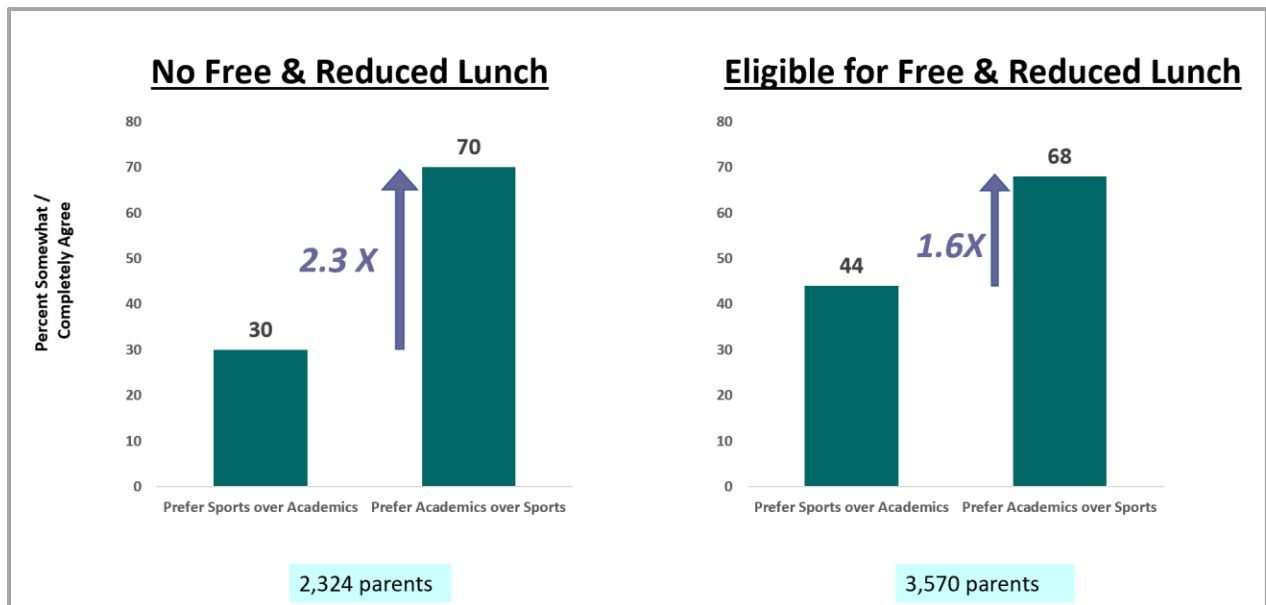
Parents are 1.8 times more likely to agree they prefer academic over sports.

**Figure 1: Overall Results**

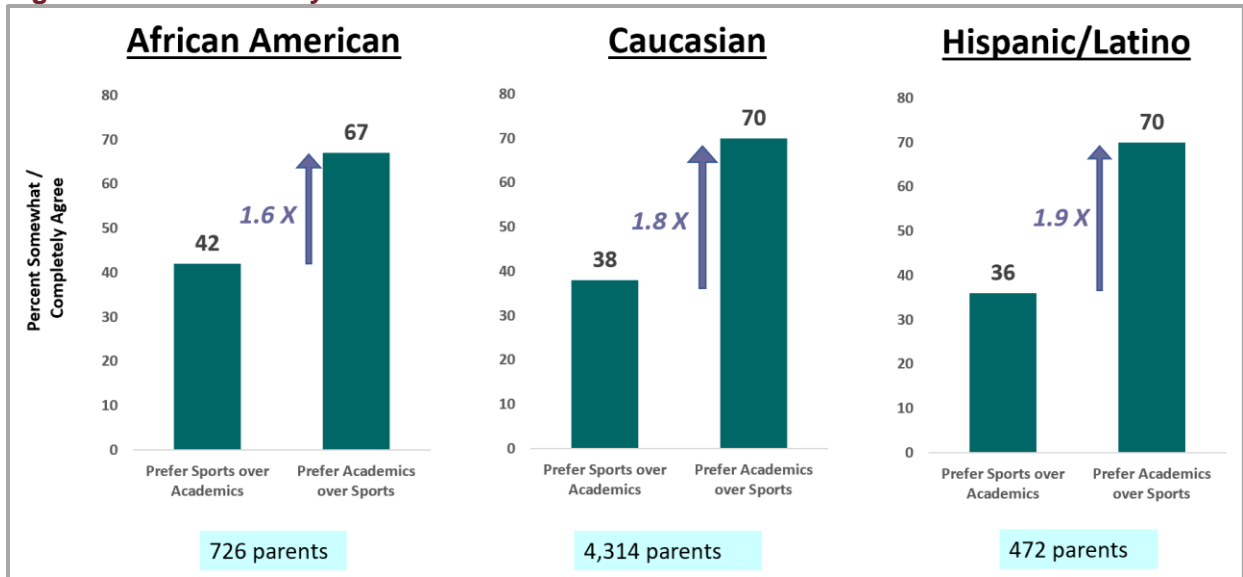


These results hold for different subgroups. In general, parents are 1.6 to 2.3 times more likely to prefer a school that has strong academics but weak sports over a school that has strong sports but weak academics.

**Figure 2: Whether Student is Eligible for Free & Reduced Lunch**



**Figure 3: Race/Ethnicity**



Parents’ preference for schools with strong academics is consistently strong among African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic/Latino parents.

## School District Strategy: What’s Next?

If school and district-leaders want to be customer-focused they will need to shed their pre-conceived notions, biases, and salient beliefs to embrace what parents value.

C-CUBES-K12™ clearly shows that parents value schools that emphasize academics over sports, and not the other way around. [Research](#) shows that physical activity has a small positive association with academic achievement. But school leaders should not see sports as a substitute for strong academics.

Too often school leaders of academically underperforming schools believe they can pull ahead by emphasizing sports. They rely on the few vocal parents who want sports, believing they are the voice of most parents. This is a mistake. The vast majority—and the silent majority—of parents prefers a school with strong academics even if sports are weak!

To succeed schools must be customer focused. To stay customer focused, they need to keep the main thing the main thing. And the main thing—as these results show—is academics, not sports.

## Author Bio

Dr. Vikas Mittal has published more than 100 articles on customer-focused strategy and worked with senior executives at more than 200 organizations. He is the co-author of a 2021 book: [\*FOCUS: How to Plan Strategy and Improve Execution to Achieve Growth\*](#).

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