

The power and value of sport in schools: Growing the sport of fencing

Building bridges: schools and community

Students who explore new sports in supportive school environments and demonstrate skills developed outside school show measurable benefits across academic, social, and emotional domains (Australian Sports Commission, 2024). Sport becomes more than physical activity, it affirms student identity and strengthens belonging (NSW Department of Education, 2024).

A safe space

School sports programs provide structured coaching that supports both sporting development and academic achievement (Australian Sports Commission, 2024). Environments where students can try new activities without fear of judgment build confidence, resilience, and risk-taking capacity, qualities that transfer directly to classroom settings (NSW Office of Sport, 2020). These programs develop teamwork, enhance mental wellbeing, and create more inclusive school communities (Australian Sports Commission, 2024).

The academic-athletic connection

The link between sport and academic success is well-established. Research tracking 3,186 students in grades 6 - 9 found school sports participation improved academic achievement through enhanced self-esteem and positive body image (Malm et al., 2019). Mill Hill School's longitudinal study (2021-2023) showed students engaged in more sports fixtures achieved notably better GCSE and A-Level results (School Management Plus, 2025).

Physical activity improves cognitive function, concentration, and problem-solving skills (Australian Sports Commission, 2024). Students who play sports demonstrate better classroom behaviour and time management (NSW Department of Education, 2024). Physical movement gives students mental space to reset and return to academic work with renewed focus (University of Newcastle & NSW Department of Education, 2020).

Peer recognition and belonging

Students who train in sports outside school gain enhanced belonging when they can showcase these abilities to peers (Chapman & Botha, 2023). Belonging is fundamental: it shapes educational outcomes more than almost any other factor (Australian Sports Commission, 2024). Students who feel they belong show higher emotional and physical wellbeing, better academic performance, and stronger optimism, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (NSW Department of Education, 2024).

Identity develops across different domains of school life, with peer recognition playing a crucial role (Den Houting, 2019). For students who excel in non-traditional school sports, demonstrating these skills to classmates validates their dedication and strengthens their school connection (Australian Sports Commission, 2024). This recognition matters especially for students who might not thrive in conventional academic or sporting contexts (NSW Office of Sport, 2020).

Social and emotional development

Student-athletes develop essential skills including leadership, time management, and collaboration (Australian Sports Commission, 2024). They form strong bonds through training and competition, learning about trust, accountability, and recognising what each person brings to a team (Tammelin et al., 2003).

Sport positively impacts self-esteem, efficacy, and self-worth, all factors that directly affect academic performance (Malm et al., 2019). Team membership provides belonging and develops communication skills, responsibility, and time management (Australian Sports Commission, 2024).

Gender equity and equal representation

How sports are structured shapes student identity development (NSW Department of Education, 2024). Sports offering equal representation and mixed-gender participation create particularly powerful learning environments (Australian Sports Commission, 2024).

Fencing demonstrates distinctive gender equity in school sport (School Management Plus, 2025). Girls in fencing attack with the same aggression and strategic thinking as boys (Academy of Fencing Masters, 2024). The sport's history underscores why equal access matters: women weren't permitted to fence sabre in American championships until 1988, excluded by outdated assumptions about female fragility (Academy of Fencing Masters, 2024).

Leadership and refereeing

Fencing offers equal officiating opportunities regardless of gender (DC Fencers Club, 2022). Students become referees, making authoritative decisions and commanding respect from peers and adults (School Management Plus, 2025). A Year 10 student might referee a Year 12 bout; a female referee might officiate a male competitor's match (DC Fencers Club, 2022). This fluidity, students shifting between competing, refereeing, and supporting, builds diverse competencies and dismantles traditional age and gender hierarchies (School Management Plus, 2025).

Universal principles

While fencing provides a clear example, these principles apply broadly: equal training access, comparable resources, leadership opportunities for all genders, mixed-gender environments where appropriate, and celebration of diverse participation patterns (Australian Sports Commission, 2024).

When students showcase skills from gender-equitable sports to classmates, they challenge stereotypes (Academy of Fencing Masters, 2024). Girls demonstrating athletic competence push back against assumptions about female capability; boys training alongside girls as equals develop genuine respect (Academy of Fencing Masters, 2024). Students recognise that competence transcends gender (NSW Department of Education, 2024). This visibility matters most during adolescence, when gender stereotypes intensify and can limit what students believe possible (Australian Sports Commission, 2024).

Supporting neurodivergent Learners

All schools support neurodivergent learners, those with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other neurological differences (Armstrong, 2010). Neurodivergent brains show different connectivity patterns: ADHD brains demonstrate enhanced connectivity for creativity and divergent thinking, while autistic brains show increased connectivity for detailed processing and pattern recognition (Foundations Cognitive, 2025). These aren't deficits—they're alternative organizational strengths that provide cognitive advantages in specific contexts (Den Houting, 2019).

Sport benefits neurodivergent students when appropriately structured (Neurodiversity Belgium, n.d.). Children with ADHD succeed in individual sports offering attentive coaching: martial arts, tennis, swimming, and fencing (Anderson, n.d.). The beneficial characteristics—clear structure, immediate feedback, focused attention opportunities, individual pacing—apply across many sports when coaches adapt their approach (Neurodiversity Belgium, n.d.).

Fencing as an exemplar

The University of Hertfordshire's pilot study with British Fencing demonstrated that fencing interventions improved core physiological aspects in children with autism and positively impacted their physical literacy skills (University of Hertfordshire & British Fencing, 2023). An Italian neuropsychiatrist describes fencing as engaging metacognitive capacity, strengthening perceptive abilities, and teaching movement reading and strategy identification, with visual and aural feedback particularly effective for autistic children (Mazzone, 2016).

For students with ADHD, fencing's structure offers specific advantages (Anderson, n.d.). Matches involve quick, focused bursts aligning with how many ADHD students engage best—providing immediate rewards and instant feedback while requiring total attention and rapid decision-making (Anderson, n.d.). Clinical psychologist Dr. David Anderson notes fencing's fast pace holds ADHD children's attention longer than other sports while helping them understand rules and boundaries (Anderson, n.d.).

Fencing's individualized nature, combined with team elements, reduces pressure while building confidence (Duncan, 2008). Unlike team sports where momentary lapses affect everyone, fencing lets students progress at their own pace (School Management Plus, 2025). Corwin Duncan, who won U16 and U18 national fencing championships, credits the sport with helping him overcome ADHD symptoms, noting it requires focused attention while maintaining self-control (Duncan, 2008).

Universal principles

The benefits observed in fencing apply to many sports when environments are thoughtfully designed (Chapman & Botha, 2023). Neurodiversity-affirming frameworks shift from deficit-focused approaches to recognizing autism and neurodivergent conditions as different abilities and strengths (Chapman & Botha, 2023). Focusing on neural difference strengths and shaping environments to fit student needs promotes wellbeing better than deficit-focused approaches (Den Houting, 2019).

Sports environments supporting neurodivergent learners share features: clear structures and routines, individual pacing opportunities, immediate tangible feedback, respectful coaching understanding diverse learning styles, sensory-aware spaces, and celebrating progress over perfection (Neurodiversity Belgium, n.d.). Studies adapting environments to be autism-friendly—including quiet rooms for sensory-sensitive participants—demonstrate success (British Fencing & The Change Foundation, 2023).

When students showcase skills from specialized sporting contexts—fencing, martial arts, individual athletics, or other pursuits—to school peers, powerful affirmation occurs (Australian Sports Commission, 2024). Neurodivergent students often face misunderstanding or stigma in traditional settings (Den Houting, 2019). Demonstrating competence in respected domains lets peers see beyond stereotypes and recognize authentic ability (Chapman & Botha, 2023). This visibility transforms how neurodivergent students are perceived and how they perceive themselves (Foundations Cognitive, 2025).

Creating inclusive opportunities

Belonging precedes achievement (NSW Department of Education, 2024). Every student needs to feel welcomed, wanted, and valued, even without formal achievements (Australian Sports Commission, 2024). Schools embracing diverse sporting opportunities—including recognizing skills developed outside traditional school sports—create environments where all students find their place (Australian Sports Commission, 2024).

Positive peer relations involve acceptance, connection, encouragement, academic and social support, trust, closeness, and caring—all facilitating school belonging (NSW Department of Education, 2024). Creating pathways for students to showcase external sporting achievements validates the whole student and strengthens vital peer connections driving wellbeing (Australian Sports Commission, 2024).

Conclusion

Trying new sports in supportive school environments and showcasing outside sporting abilities to peers creates measurable improvements in academic success, social connection, and emotional wellbeing (Australian Sports Commission, 2024). Sport's impact on student health and academics plays a vital role in holistic development (NSW Office of Sport, 2020). Fostering environments valuing all sporting endeavors, whether developed in school or beyond, creates communities where every student can thrive, belong, and achieve their full potential (NSW Department of Education, 2024).

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