



Oak Hill
ATHLETIC CONSULTING

— A WHITE PAPER FROM OAK HILL ATHLETIC CONSULTING

THE TOTAL IMPACT OF A THRIVING ATHLETIC DEPARTMENT

*What the evidence says about culture, retention, and the
real cost of an athletic program that runs on default.*

ATHLETICS IS THE MOST VISIBLE PART OF A SCHOOL, AND THE LEAST MEASURED.

A thriving athletic department is not a luxury a school adds once everything else is settled. It is one of the few programs that touches enrollment, retention, culture, and reputation at the same time, and it does so at a cost most schools would consider a rounding error.

1-3%

of a school's budget is what activity programs typically cost, and often less than 1% in large districts.¹

8.1%

of students leave the median independent school every year.²

\$37,135

list tuition for one upper-school student who re-enrolls instead of leaving.²

+0.85

efficiency margin for every additional year a coaching staff stays together, in Division I men's basketball.⁵

70% VS 67%

federal graduation rate, Division III student-athletes versus the general student body.⁴

12

organizational-health pillars that separate a department built by design from one running by default.⁷

What this paper does

It gathers the public evidence on what athletic participation, belonging, retention, and coaching continuity are worth to a school, states the numbers with their sources and their limits, and then describes what a thriving department actually looks like inside, using the twelve-pillar framework Oak Hill uses in its audits.

What this paper does not do

It does not claim that any single program causes retention to rise by a stated percentage, because no published study supports that claim for independent schools, and a head of school or trustee should distrust anyone who makes it. Where a figure is associational, or drawn from a different level of competition, this paper says so beside the figure.

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THE MOST VISIBLE, LEAST MEASURED PROGRAM ON CAMPUS

Every parent on campus knows the score of Friday's game. Very few people on campus can say whether the department that produced it is healthy.

Athletics carries a weight in a school's life that is out of proportion to its budget line. It is the program prospective families see first, the one current families talk about most, and the one that puts the school's name in front of the community every week of the year. It shapes how students experience belonging, how coaches experience their work, and how a board experiences the school's reputation.

Yet it is routinely the least measured part of the institution. Academic departments are accredited, reviewed, and benchmarked. Athletic departments are usually judged by two things: the win-loss record, and whether anything went wrong this year. Neither tells a head of school whether the coaches are working as one staff or as twelve silos, whether the budget follows priorities or history, or whether the mission statement on the gym wall is visible in a Tuesday practice.

"Is your athletic culture built by design, or by default?"

The question Oak Hill asks every school before an audit begins. Most departments were never designed. They accumulated.

Why "by default" is expensive

A department running on default is not usually in crisis. It is running on momentum: the same coaches, the same traditions, the same budget shape, the same unanswered questions. The costs show up slowly and elsewhere on the balance sheet, as a coach who leaves after two seasons, a family that quietly re-enrolls somewhere else, or a board conversation about athletics that only ever happens after something has gone wrong.

The sections that follow put numbers beside each of those costs, using public sources a board can check. The numbers are not Oak Hill's. The framework for reading them, in Section 5, is.

WHAT PARTICIPATION IS WORTH

The case for school athletics has been made, publicly and repeatedly, by the governing bodies that oversee it. It rests on cost, on academic outcomes, and on what happens to students after they graduate.

The cost side

The National Federation of State High School Associations puts activity programs at one to three percent of a school's overall budget, and often less. Its 2019–20 district examples are stark: Chicago set aside \$17.5 million of a \$6.56 billion budget, and Miami-Dade \$17.7 million of \$5.45 billion. In each case activities were under one percent of the total.¹ Independent-school budgets are structured differently, but the proportion rarely changes the conclusion: athletics is one of the least expensive things a school does relative to how much of the school's life it carries.

The academic side

The same body summarizes the research plainly: students who participate in activity programs “tend to have higher grade-point averages, better attendance records, lower dropout rates and fewer discipline problems than students generally.”¹ The studies it draws on found that sports-team participation was independently associated with higher GPA for both boys and girls, beyond the effect of physical activity alone, and that athletes graduated at higher rates and dropped out at lower rates than non-athletes.¹

MEASURE	STUDENT-ATHLETES	GENERAL STUDENT BODY	SOURCE
Federal graduation rate, NCAA Division III (four-class average)	70%	67%	NCAA, Nov. 2024 ⁴
Division III Academic Success Rate (four-cohort average)	88%	—	NCAA, Nov. 2024 ⁴
Division III ASR, women / men	94% / 84%	—	NCAA, Nov. 2024 ⁴

The federal rate is the only measure that allows a direct athlete-versus-nonathlete comparison; the Academic Success Rate also credits transfers and students who left while academically eligible, so it is not comparable to the general-body figure.

The belonging side

A large meta-analytic review of secondary-school research found that a student's sense of belonging at school is associated with better motivational, social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes.³ Team sport is one of the most direct ways a school builds that belonging, which is why a department's culture is not a soft concern. It is the mechanism by which a very inexpensive program produces a very expensive-to-replace outcome: a student who feels the school is theirs.

WHAT ONE FAMILY IS WORTH

Independent schools already measure attrition carefully. What they rarely do is connect that number to the department most responsible for whether a student wants to come back.

8.10%

median student attrition, all NAIS member schools, 2024–25²

10.18%

average student attrition, same population²

364

median enrollment of an NAIS member school²

At the median school, an 8.1% attrition rate is about 29 families every year. Some of that movement is structural, as families relocate or students finish. Some of it is not, and the not-structural share is where a school's culture, including its athletic culture, does its quiet work.

Putting a figure on one decision

NAIS MEDIAN DAY TUITION, 2024-25

Grade 9	\$37,135
Grade 11	\$36,603
Grade 12	\$36,615
Average day tuition, all grades	\$32,251

One upper-school student who re-enrolls instead of leaving is therefore worth roughly \$37,000 in list tuition for the next year alone, and a student retained in grade 9 rather than lost carries three further years behind that first one.

Two honest caveats. First, these are list prices: 26.2% of NAIS students receive financial aid, at a median grant of \$21,722, so net revenue per student is lower than the figures above. Second, attrition has many causes, and no published study isolates the share attributable to athletic culture. The figures size the stakes; they do not promise a return.²

Why this belongs in the athletics conversation

A board that reviews attrition annually and reviews athletics only when something goes wrong is reviewing the effect without ever examining one of its largest causes. The purpose of putting a tuition figure beside the department is not to turn coaches into enrollment officers. It is to make the case that a modest, one-time investment in understanding the department is small next to what a single family's decision represents.

WHAT A STAFF THAT STAYS TOGETHER IS WORTH

Coaches leave. The question a leader should ask is not whether turnover happens but what each year of continuity is worth while it lasts.

The clearest public answer comes from an analysis presented at the NCAA Division I Data Summit in March 2020. Carousel Analytics examined 4,167 team-seasons of Division I men's basketball from 2007–08 through 2018–19, defining staff continuity as the number of consecutive years a team's core coaching staff stayed together without any turnover.⁵

+0.85

efficiency margin per additional year of staff continuity, all conference levels⁵

+1.10

per year at the high-major level, where the effect was largest⁵

P < .05

continuity remained significant after controlling for staff experience⁵

Two findings matter for a school. First, the effect was linear: every additional year together added to performance, and the researchers note that at each further level of continuity the sample roughly halves, because staffs that stay together for many years are rare. Second, continuity and experience were tested together in a multivariate model, and continuity held. A staff that has been together longer outperforms a staff that is merely more experienced.⁵

This is college basketball, and the relationship is associational. Oak Hill does not claim the coefficient transfers to a high school volleyball program. What transfers is the shape of the finding: continuity is a measurable asset, and the conditions that produce it, such as clear roles, a healthy staff culture, and leaders who develop the people under them, are exactly the conditions an audit examines.

The turnover a school can see, and the kind it cannot

Visible turnover is the head coach who resigns in May. Invisible turnover is the assistant who stays but stops leading, the coach who runs a program in a silo because no one ever built the department around them, or the athletic director carrying a workload the position was never designed to hold. In Oak Hill's audits, the second kind is found far more often than the first, and it shows up in the same three pillars every time: staff culture, staff roles and development, and leadership processes.

"One of the most important results of that work is that our talented coaches, who previously largely worked in silos with their programs, are now working together to help create a unified athletic department better aligned with our school's overall mission, values, culture, and vision."

Steve O'Neil, then Head of School, Vail Christian High School⁸

WHAT “THRIVING” LOOKS LIKE: THE TWELVE PILLARS

A thriving department is not defined by a trophy case. It is defined by twelve things that are true inside the building, whether or not the season went well.

Oak Hill measures the organizational health of an athletic department across twelve pillars. Each one is assessed through a survey of athletic leadership, staff, and coaches, then tested in person during an on-campus visit. The framework is the same for every school, whatever it believes, because these twelve things are true of every athletic department in the country.⁷

01 Staffing Personnel and the amount of staffing the program actually needs	02 Staff culture Trust, conflict, commitment, accountability, attention to detail
03 Staff roles & development Clarity of roles, and the processes that grow people	04 Mission, vision, values clarity Whether they are clear, and whether they are practical
05 Funding Whether money supports the mission and is aligned across programs	06 Structural efficiency & clarity Reporting structures and evaluation processes
07 Communication clarity How efficiently the department communicates with its constituents	08 Communication frequency Whether frequency produces clarity and reinforcement
09 Leadership effectiveness Efficiency, and the development of staff and programs	10 Leadership processes Evaluation processes and day-to-day operating processes
11 Facilities Whether the spaces support the mission, vision, and values	12 External & other factors Threats, competition, growth, and outside influencers

How to read your own department against them

Most departments are strong in three or four pillars, adequate in most, and thin in two or three, and the thin pillars are rarely the ones leadership would have guessed. Staff culture and communication frequency, in particular, tend to be rated very differently by the athletic director and by the coaches who report to that director. That gap between the view from the office and the view from the field is itself a finding, and it is the reason an outside read is worth more than an internal one.

HOW THRIVING DEPARTMENTS GET BUILT

A report that names problems is not a plan. Departments change when findings are turned into behaviours over a season, with someone alongside the leader while it happens.

1

Personalized scope and sequence

An individual plan built with the school's leadership before any survey is sent. No two departments are audited the same way.

2

Internal survey

A 70-question assessment delivered to athletic leadership, staff, and coaches across the twelve organizational-health pillars.

3

On-campus visit

One to two days on site with key constituents, gathering the story behind the survey and assessing health and culture in the room.

4

Outcome document

A twelve-point document of strengths, weaknesses, blind spots, and threats, with recommendations, coaching points, and an implementation roadmap.

5

Six months of partnership

Ongoing consulting and one-on-one coaching to implement the findings, so that a document becomes a department.

What it produced at one school

Vail Christian High School engaged Oak Hill after its strategic plan made athletic distinction a priority. The outcome document gave the school a seven-stage roadmap it is now implementing, followed by a half-day clinic for all coaches on Behaviors Matter and Defining Success. The head of school's summary: coaches who had worked in silos now work as one department.⁸

"As we are in a new institutional strategic plan, we invested in this process and it has shown to be extremely helpful as we look for ways to improve, grow, and get better at what we do. It is an investment, but from my perspective it has been totally worth it."

Matt Webb, Director of Athletics, Houghton University⁸

"They were able to assess our processes, policies and culture and give us valuable feedback to inform our new strategic plan ... and gave us a finished product that was extremely useful and will inform many decisions moving forward."

Sarah Gustin-Hamrock, Executive Director of Athletics, Messiah University⁸

TEN QUESTIONS FOR A BOARD OR HEAD OF SCHOOL

If athletics only reaches the board's agenda when something has gone wrong, these are the questions that put it there on purpose. Each maps to one of the twelve pillars.

- 1** Could every coach in the department state the school's mission, and could a visitor see it in a Tuesday practice?
Pillar 4 · Mission, vision, values clarity

- 2** Does the athletics budget follow current priorities, or the shape it had ten years ago?
Pillar 5 · Funding

- 3** How many coaches have left in the last three years, and does anyone know why each one did?
Pillars 2 and 3 · Staff culture; staff roles and development

- 4** Is the athletic director's workload one the position was designed to carry?
Pillar 1 · Staffing

- 5** When were coaches last formally evaluated, by whom, and against what?
Pillar 10 · Leadership processes

- 6** Would the coaches describe the staff's culture the same way the athletic director does?
Pillar 2 · Staff culture

- 7** Do parents and students hear from the department often enough, and clearly enough, to act on what they hear?
Pillars 7 and 8 · Communication clarity and frequency

- 8** Who does the athletic director report to, and is that structure written down anywhere?
Pillar 6 · Structural efficiency and clarity

- 9** Do the facilities serve the mission, or has the mission quietly been shaped by the facilities?
Pillar 11 · Facilities

- 10** What is the biggest external threat to the program in the next three years, and who is responsible for watching it?
Pillar 12 · External and other factors

If more than three of these cannot be answered with confidence in the room, the department is not failing. It is unmeasured, which is the normal state of athletic departments, and the reason an honest outside read is the right first step rather than the last resort.

ABOUT OAK HILL

Oak Hill Athletic Consulting partners with private high schools, colleges, universities, and athletic associations to build programs known for great culture and competitive excellence. Its work began in Christian schools and colleges, where much of it still happens; the method is the same for any school that wants its department built by design.



Andrew Bryan

CO-FOUNDER

Teacher, coach, athletic director, and leader of leaders since 1997. A former college athlete and state-championship coach, he has also served on executive leadership teams responsible for strategy and operations across hundreds of employees.



Mike Freace

CO-FOUNDER

Athletic director, teacher, and coach across 25+ years at the high school and collegiate levels, including the Olympic Development Program, and former Executive Director of a national sports-based nonprofit.

Between them, on the sideline and in the athletic director's office:

36

region
championships

11

state
championships

29

region coach of
the year

10

state coach of the
year

10

top-5 Directors'
Cup finishes

20

years leading
state-champion
programs

Three ways Oak Hill works with a school



The Athletic Audit

The five-stage process in Section 6: scope, survey, campus visit, a twelve-point outcome document, and six months of partnership to implement it.



Executive Coaching

Small cohorts and one-on-one coaching for athletic directors, built on the conviction that leaders are better in consistent proximity with other like-minded leaders.



Leadership Training

Six modules for coaching staffs, delivered as half-day or full-day sessions and tailored to the school. Behaviors Matter is where every program starts.

Details, the three-minute program pulse, and both founders' direct contacts are at oakhill.consulting.

WHERE EVERY FIGURE IN THIS PAPER COMES FROM

Each number carries the note beside it in the text. This page gives the full reference so a board member can check any of them in a few minutes.

- 1 National Federation of State High School Associations, *The Case for High School Activities* (budget examples from the 2019–20 school year). nfhs.org/stories/the-case-for-high-school-activities
- 2 National Association of Independent Schools, *2025 Facts at a Glance: All NAIS Member Schools*, data-entry year 2024–25, 1,331 schools. nais.org/data-and-research/school-surveys
- 3 Korpershoek, H., Canrinus, E. T., Fokkens-Bruinsma, M., & de Boer, H. (2019). The relationships between school belonging and students' motivational, social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes in secondary education: a meta-analytic review. *Research Papers in Education*. doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2019.1615116
- 4 NCAA, *DIII student-athletes continue to thrive in the classroom*, 20 November 2024. ncaa.org
- 5 Austin, S. (Carousel Analytics), *The Relationship of Staff Experience and Continuity with Team Success in Division I NCAA Men's Basketball*, NCAA Division I Data Summit, March 2020. N = 4,167 team-seasons, 2007–08 to 2018–19. ncaaorg.s3.amazonaws.com
- 6 Attrition and tuition arithmetic in Section 3 is Oak Hill's, applied to the NAIS medians in source 2. List tuition is used throughout; net tuition is lower.
- 7 Oak Hill Athletic Consulting, *Athletic Audit Roadmap* and the twelve-point Outcome Document framework, 2025.
- 8 Client testimonials published at oakhill.consulting, reproduced with attribution. Steve O'Neil was Head of School at Vail Christian High School at the time of the engagement.



READY TO FIND OUT WHAT YOUR DEPARTMENT IS BUILT ON?

The Athletic Audit begins with a conversation. Take the three-minute pulse at oakhill.consulting to see where your own rings are thinnest, or write to either of us directly.

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