



ESRI Research Bulletin

Participation in School Sport and Post-school Pathways

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This Bulletin summarises the findings from: Lunn, Peter D. and Kelly, Elish (2015) "Participation in School Sport and Post-School Pathways: Evidence from Ireland", *National Institute Economic Review*, 232: R51-R66.

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INTRODUCTION

Are students who participate in sport at school more likely to go on to college? Conversely, are students who drop out from school sport less likely to continue formal education after the Leaving Certificate? This paper used data from the 2007 School Leavers' Survey to address these questions.

International research suggests that there may be positive links between participation in school sport, academic performance and outcomes in the labour market. Controlling for background characteristics, studies in America and Germany suggest that participants in sport tend to get better academic results and to obtain more senior positions in the workplace as adults, although there is debate about the strength of these effects and what underlies them.

ESRI research has previously found that participants in school sport do, on average, get better results in the Leaving Certificate.² This Bulletin summarises new research on the impact of playing sport at school on what students do after school.

THE DATA

Our study used data from the School Leavers' Survey conducted in Spring/Summer 2007, which interviewed 2,025 individuals approximately two years after leaving school. The survey obtained detailed information about students' backgrounds, time at school, attitudes towards school and their lives since leaving school. It also asked about their involvement in extra-curricular sport in each of their second-level school years, including not only team sports but also individual sports and exercise activities.

We built statistical models to examine the relationship between students' patterns of participation in sport at second-level school and their situation two years after leaving school. The models controlled for social background, how strongly attached students felt to the school, and the last exam students sat (i.e., Junior Cert School Programme, Established Junior Certificate, Established Leaving

¹ This Bulletin summarises the findings from: Lunn, Peter D. and Kelly, Elish (2015) "Participation in School Sport and Post-School Pathways: Evidence from Ireland", *National Institute Economic Review*, 232: R51-R66.

² Lunn, P.; Kelly, E. and Fitzpatrick, N. (2013) "Keeping Them in the Game: Taking Up and Dropping Out of Sport and Exercise in Ireland", *ESRI Research Series Number 33*, Dublin, ESRI.

Certificate, etc.). Since we wanted to compare robustly the outcomes for students with one pattern of participation in sport against the outcomes for students with a different pattern of participation in sport but who were as similar as possible on all other observable characteristics, we used a technique called “propensity score matching”.

RESULTS

We found that the most important factor was not whether a student played extra-curricular sport during second-level, but whether they continued to do so in their final school years. Many students dropped out of sport during or after the Junior Cycle and/or Transition Year, while others kept up their participation during Senior Cycle. We found that this latter group were more likely to continue their formal education after leaving school. The effect was large: continued participation in sport increased the likelihood of continuing in education rather than joining the labour market by 9-14 percentage points.

We found that this effect was somewhat reduced (but nevertheless still significant) when we controlled for students’ attachment to school, including how motivated they were, what they thought of the teachers and the classroom environment, and whether they ever played truant. Similarly, when we controlled for the last exam students sat, the link between the pattern of participation in sport and the likelihood of continuing formal education remained significant.

CONCLUSIONS

Students who participate in sport in their final years of second-level school are significantly and substantially more likely to continue their formal education after leaving school. To some extent, this effect may reflect the fact that those who participate in sport are more likely to enjoy an educational environment and to do well in their exams. However, these factors appear to explain only part of the influence of extra-curricular sport on post-school pathways.

Economic models of the decision whether to pursue more education or to join the labour market usually centre on a specific trade-off. Individuals can trade-off immediate income by joining the labour market against (potentially higher) future income by increasing their skills through more education. Our results suggest that other factors matter too. For example, some more immediate attractions of college may play an important role in young people’s decisions, including convenient opportunities to play sport.

Our study also adds to the evidence that participation in sport has benefits beyond immediate enjoyment and a positive impact on health and fitness. Such evidence supports policy efforts to increase participation in sport. However, it is important to note that our study surrounds only voluntary participation in school sport. Hence it says nothing about the role of Physical Education (PE) at school. Rather, it suggests that there may be benefits to increasing students’ opportunities for voluntary participation in sport during Senior Cycle.