

# PEP Talks: Podcast on Educational Possibilities powered by the National Coalition of Girls' School - Transcript

## Episode 3: Value of Athletics for Girls

[00:00:00] **Olivia Haas:** [00:00:00] Research shows that an overwhelming majority of women executives, 82% participated in a sport at one time in their lives, beyond the elementary school level. In the same study, 60% of women executives, credited sports participation with helping them develop a competitive edge that aided them with succeeding professionally it's proof positive that starting from early ages.

[00:00:22] Involvement with athletics serves as an important vehicle for girls to learn the value of perseverance, teamwork and other foundational skills that can help them thrive on any path they choose. Physical activity also has a positive impact on academics beyond the joy, energy, and confidence. Students gained from movement research demonstrates that daily exercise improves memory, attention and cognition.

[00:00:48] Hello, and thank you for tuning in to pep talks, podcasts on educational possibilities produced by the national coalition of girls schools. I'm Olivia Haas, your host. In this episode, I'm joined by the executive directors of the girls athletic leadership schools located in Denver, Colorado, and Los Angeles, California.

[00:01:08] The schools are affectionately known as GALS, Denver and GALS LA Carol Bowar, and Denver served as a member of the founding board of gals before leading the school. And Carrie Wagner is the Founder and Executive Director of the Los Angeles based campus, as well as the CEO of GALS National, the central philosophy of these tuition free charter schools is healthy bodies, fuel healthy minds.

[00:01:34] Both locations start serving students and the critical middle school years with gals Denver, offering grades six through 12 and GALS Los Angeles being for grades six through twelve. I'm looking forward to speaking with Carol and Carrie about how incorporating movement into the school day helps their students succeed.

[00:01:51] But first let's hear from NCGS Executive Director. Megan Murphy. Megan, would you like to tell us about some resources offered by NCGS that are related to today's conversation?

[00:02:03] **Megan Murphy:** [00:02:03] Sure. I'm happy to do that. Olivia, you know, health and wellness is a very important concentration area for girls

schools. So you'll find several sections of the NCGS website with resources related to this important topic.

[00:02:18] Um, First, um, as an example, our reason girls forces blog has a dedicated health and wellness category with essays, addressing a variety of topics, such as how girls schools are places where female athletes get the recognition they really deserve. There are several essays on the importance of modeling, healthy leadership, as well as educating the whole female child.

[00:02:43] And then there's another essay on the need for the media to give equal coverage and celebration of both men's and women's sports, as well as their elite athletes. And then being posted soon will be reflections from our research [00:03:00] intern, Alexis Arvin ball, who is a graduate of the Madeira school. And Alexa will share her experiences as an athlete at a girl's school.

[00:03:09] Vis-a-vis her coed university experiences. Secondly, the NCGS research database has a dedicated category for health and wellness, as well as athletics with over 20 relevant studies and included in this section of the database is a recent case study from the Chan Zuckerberg initiative that features the girls.

[00:03:34] Athletic leadership schools. Uh, this study also profiles approximately 10 other schools that are expanding the definition of students who access by going beyond academics. And then lastly, in the member resource center@ncgs.org, you can access curated content on highly relevant topics to girl schools, such as our girls in athletics.

[00:04:00] [00:04:00] **Olivia Haas:** [00:04:00] That's terrific. Thanks so much, Megan. Really appreciate it. We invited students at the gals campuses to share a little bit about their experiences. Here are some of their reflections

[00:04:10] **Student:** [00:04:10] Everyday movement at GALS helps me maintain my focus on my academics because I had a chance to use my physical energy, which gives me more room for focusing on schoolwork.

[00:04:20] I feel like exercising every day helps me grow and as an individual, because I am learning to love my body and all the things that it can do, having movement every day. Also really makes me realize that I can achieve anything. If I try hard enough, I used to not be able to do like two pushups and now I can do 15 in a row.

[00:04:45] I really love how it motivates you. And. Helps you get going for the day and helps you stay as focused.

[00:04:52] How daily movement at GALS supports me is it gives me motivation and wakes up my brain so I could [00:05:00] focus on hundred percent in school. And it also makes me want to eat healthier.

[00:05:05]

[00:05:05] I love my daily movement and exercise. It helps me with my academics because I am so ready. And I'm so pumped up from my exercise that I get into class and I will have this energy and it makes me work really hard with my schoolwork. And for my individual side, it makes me grow as an individual because it gives me this confidence when suddenly you're able to do 20 mountain climbers in 10 minutes cardio workout. It makes you feel really strong and proud, and it just gives you so much more confidence and self love. It's amazing.

[00:05:41] **Olivia Haas:** [00:05:41] Carol and Carrie thanks for joining me after just hearing from some of your students, I'm even more excited for this conversation than I already was.

[00:05:49] Carol you've been involved with the girls athletic leadership schools since inception. What was the impetus behind the creation of gals? A girl's school dedicated to mind body development?

[00:05:59] **Carol Bowar:** [00:05:59] The [00:06:00] impetus behind starting gals was actually a book called spark by John ratty. And that was a book around mind, body connection. And I think it really resonated with our founders because it. Is one of the things that, um, tends to be a hurdle in the gender socialized world of adolescent girls.

[00:06:18] So in reading this book, it kind of was like, Hey, wait a minute. If we could create a space for adolescent girls that would really allow them to stand in their own worth and power and find their true selves, it really has to include this idea of understanding and knowing that your body is part of who you are right?

[00:06:39] So this idea of movement based education is really bound by some of these principles. That movement really helps jumpstart the brain by jumpstarting the body that your heart rate is connected to your brain's ability to process and intake information that moving every day is something that wakes up the adolescent brain [00:07:00] from the sleepiness that it sometimes has normally and allows people to really be ready to dive into something for the day. Um, in research really shows that, um, cognitive functions related to attention and memory and facilitating learning are all functions that are enhanced by physical activity and by sort of aerobic fitness.

[00:07:19] So like all of those things combined really created this vision and this idea of movement-based learning really being a key to having a powerful place where girls can be their true selves.

[00:07:30] **Olivia Haas:** [00:07:30] So Carrie, what drew you to the gals model and motivated you to start the second campus in Los Angeles?

[00:07:36] **Carrie Wagner:** [00:07:36] I got excited about the gals model, um, because I saw that girls could actually be happy in middle school. Like, I

didn't know that was possible, cause I definitely was not happy in middle school. So I was really excited to see that there was a school where the girls were joyful and happy and had high energy and were learning. Um, how were they? They were and how to take good care [00:08:00] of their body and to have a school that leads with health and wellness as the key component to success, you know. And not just like success in academics, but success in life. And I also know that this is the age, um, to work with these girls to get healthy behavior patterns happening. Cause if you start working out and knowing how good it is to take care of your body and love your body the way it is at this age, I don't know what would have happened to me. If I had had that. I feel like I would have saved a lot of therapy bills to be honest. So anyway, it's just, it was amazing. And I was so excited to be able to bring it to Los Angeles.

[00:08:38] **Olivia Haas:** [00:08:38] So when one hears girls athletic leadership school, they might assume that it's a school dedicated to young women who are focused on competitive sports, but I believe that your definition of athletics is much broader than that. Are your students already involved in sports when they start at GALS? And how do you define athletics? Carol? Let's start with you.

[00:08:59] **Carol Bowar:** [00:08:59] One of the [00:09:00] things we say at gals is if you have a body, you are an athlete. So we know by that, that every single student that walks through our doors, We consider them an athlete because they, we know that they can move their bodies in a way that will help support their growth physically, as well as cognitively, as well as social-emotionally.

[00:09:18] So we certainly have kids that come to us that have been participating in sports teams before we also have a lot of kids. Who have never ridden a bicycle who have never played on a sports team who don't even really understand what it feels like to get your heart rate up. So we draw from every corner of our city and, um, really provide a space as well.

[00:09:41] That allows every student, no matter how they feel that they are an athlete. Um, uh, a starting point that's right, for them to be able to grow in their own awareness of their body and understanding what their body needs for them to be at their best selves.

[00:09:57] **Olivia Haas:** [00:09:57] I love that if you have a body, you are an athlete [00:10:00] that's really fabulous. Carrie, I'd love to hear your thoughts on this question.

[00:10:04] **Carrie Wagner:** [00:10:04] Well, I think Carol did a great job of answering that. She said everything that I would, that I would have said as well. The one thing at GALS LA, um, that I would just add as we have, um, at gals Denver too, like there's all these cute t-shirts girl, you crushed it like really positive things on these t-shirts and we have a t-shirt that says I am an athlete.

[00:10:22] And just for them to own that, um, with the, I am an athlete is really, really powerful to me. Um, and I know it impacts them and then they become identified as I'm an athlete. And then when we see them go on to high school or college, like they, they are actually competitive athletes because they've started that at such a young age, that mindset.

[00:10:45] And the other thing I think is so interesting when I talk about, um, athleticism with Gals is our first. Couple of years, we have girls. I mean, every year I would say we have girls come in and their heart has never worked as [00:11:00] hard as it works when you run. Cause they've never had that type of cardio experience before and they think they're having a heart attack.

[00:11:08] So it's just like a sad state when we're getting to a point where kids don't even know what it feels like to work that hard. So the fact that they're getting that. In middle is huge. I don't know what would happen to them if they don't have it, because I know the local middle schools that, that the girls in LA, we go to where we're located.

[00:11:25] They just have them walk around a field for PE they're never raising their heart rate. So to get them to do that at this age, it's just going to help them understand that it makes them feel really good and it will allow them to, um, become, you know, more healthy as they move along.

[00:11:45]

[00:11:45] **Olivia Haas:** [00:11:45] So let's talk about how you incorporate movement into your curriculum. What does a typical school day look like? Carrie, let's start with you.

[00:11:52] **Carrie Wagner:** [00:11:52] A typical school day starts with a lot of energy. I can tell you that. So we all are out working out as a [00:12:00] community. So the teachers are out there. I am out there with them and we're doing lots of different, fun things.

[00:12:06] Like we'll do hip hop or we'll do yoga, or we'll do circuit training. We do organize sports in the morning. And, um, afterwards, like there's just. So much energy with, with these girls. In fact, we're, co-located on a high school and they got upset with us because our girls are coming back from working out in the morning.

[00:12:22] And they're very loud. And to me, I think that's a sign of success because these girls, their brains are ready to learn. They have high energy and in a regular school, you just like, slub it. And you'd be so tired, you know, when you're starting your first class, but our first class has just like. Hi, high-energy so we do start that.

[00:12:43] And then we end our, um, morning movement with a positive affirmation. So they say the student pledge, which has great things in it. Like I know who I am. I know that I matter, I take good care of my body. So we

consider, you know, the workout to be for their body. And then we consider this pledge to be for their, you know, mind, body, [00:13:00] spirit, and then they go on to learn.

[00:13:02] So you'd imagine that our first class has really good results, you know, after having that morning movement. And then we do these things called brain boost. And so we take three to five minutes and service to the brain during class. And so sometimes these brain boosts look like, um, the related to the content.

[00:13:21] So if you think this answer is true, You know, do a downward dog. If you think the answer is false to a squat. So that would be like one example, or they're just completely breaks for community building like, Hey, let's all cross hands and get into a human knots and then figure out as a team, how we can get out of the human knot.

[00:13:45] So they're doing that throughout the day. Our uniform is a hoodie and sweat pants and a t-shirt because we're moving all day. And, um, so they think it's really fun. And again, they're owning their body and their, um, [00:14:00] yeah, just learning how important it is to keep everything moving.

[00:14:05] **Olivia Haas:** [00:14:05] Carol. Do you have anything that you want to add?

[00:14:07] **Carol Bowar:** [00:14:07] Movement is incorporated into the gals day, a number of different ways. So first is that every morning starts with movement and that's for everybody 45 minutes of aerobics of running of team sports of yoga, of dance, a number of different things that is designed to do a couple of things. One is to get your heart rate up.

[00:14:25] One is to increase your happy factor. One is to bond with your peers and really just get you prepared for the day. So that is connected to that, um, research around the connection between that physical activity and your cognitive functioning improving. Right. That being said, we also know that if we just did that once it would not be enough.

[00:14:47] So our dress code is that you wear athletic gear and tennis shoes every day. Um, and that all throughout the day, including in your core classes, you might experience a different things where you are asked to get up and move. [00:15:00] So that could look like a, a short break to get up and do a lap around the school.

[00:15:05] Um, but that could also look like standing up and reading, uh, different things that are posted either around your room or doing a treasure hunt around the school to find problems that you have to solve. Or playing a game to create data for math functions that you need to solve.

[00:15:22] So it is used to teach content. It is used to enhance content and it is also used to reboot your brain to be able to focus on content.

[00:15:32] **Olivia Haas:** [00:15:32] Carol, there's something you touched upon at the start of our conversation, which I would love for you to expand on. Why do you think it's important for this type of curriculum and pedagogy to be offered as a girls school?

[00:15:43] **Carol Bowar:** [00:15:43] Growing up girl could be a complicated thing. When you are an adolescent girl, you are receiving all kinds of normed and outlier messages about who you should be, why you should be a certain way, um, and gender socializations and stereotypes that. Might not [00:16:00] be positive for you and might in fact be negative for you.

[00:16:03] So first creating an all-girl space, remove some of those barriers in and of themselves, so that, um, kind of creates a more level playing field for girls to be able to really just be their true selves. There was a study once a long time ago that said, Oh, if boys and girls are in a gym together, girls might sit on the sideline and boys will play basketball.

[00:16:21] But if girls are in the gym by themselves, all the girls would be playing basketball. Right. So just kind of remove some of those layers that might get in the way of girls being their true selves and being their true, um, physical selves as well. So I think that that, um, that's really. GALS gives girls permission to be who they want to be in their physical bodies, as well as in their adolescent growth stages, as well as in the social, emotional, and intellectual development questioning that they might have.

[00:16:51] And so to layer on this idea of you, your complete self includes your friends, physical wellness, it just creates a [00:17:00] really safe, fun fair space and equitable space for girls to dive into some of those questions for themselves and participate in some of those opportunities.

[00:17:10] **Olivia Haas:** [00:17:10] Carol, that's a really beautiful segue into what I wanted to talk about next, which is positive body image and mental health. Social media has created this culture where we're constantly comparing ourselves to others. How do we educate young women to be resilient? Despite the uphill battle they face with negative media images. Carrie. What are your reflections on this?

[00:17:30] **Carrie Wagner:** [00:17:30] Yeah, as you said, like social media is so challenging. I mean, to be looking worried about likes and to be worried about, um, making sure you look as pretty as possible and then to be putting filters on so that you look as pretty as possible.

[00:17:45] It's all not doing great things for girls mental health. And so at GALS, we have a class called the gal series. So they take it every day. And I think it's just as important as math or science. And in this class, they [00:18:00] learn about self-esteem and confidence and how you really need to love yourself for exactly who you are.



[00:18:06] And I think that this reinforcement really, really helps them. And we also try to take in, um, people that they will relate to. So we have this, this woman, for instance, who's an Instagram star and she was anorexic and skinny and matched what the models look like. And she was very unhappy and now she's very healthy and she is.

[00:18:31] What some people might consider to be overweight, but she loves her body and shows the girls how beautiful she is. And when you look at her picture, like side by side, it's just amazing. She does look more beautiful as the larger being that she is then when she was starving herself. And it's these kinds of role models.

[00:18:50] I mean, she's in her twenties, she's Latina. Like it's these kinds of role models that really, really helped the girls. Um, understand. So not, we don't really like to do things where we're [00:19:00] talking at the girls, cause that's not what gals is about. So it's really finding positive role models for them to really follow

[00:19:09] **Carol Bowar:** [00:19:09] yeah social media it's a gift and a curse at the same time. Right. Especially if you are a young person. Probably also, if you are a parent of a young person. Um, so there is a ton to say about body image and about the, um, shaming that's done, um, around body shaming, um, and not enough sort of positive reinforcement about who you are.

[00:19:34] So one of the things that we, um, build our curriculum off of is the GALS pledge. Um, in the first three lines of the pledge are I know who I am. I know that I matter. And I know what matters to me, and that really grounds so much of our curriculum, both in academic pieces and enrichment pieces, as well as the movement pieces.

[00:19:56] So, um, we [00:20:00] normalize all body types. We normalize that girls will have questions about being chesty and being a runner at the same time. We normalize that coordination shows up in the development of large and small skill, motor development differently for girls at different times. So no matter who you are, when you step into a GALS school, you're okay.

[00:20:22] As a matter of fact, you're good. You're great. Exactly who you are. And we create a space for you to be able to grow into being your best self. So that doesn't look the same for every kiddo either. So we, um, sort of differentiate that in all the different parts of our model, around our social, emotional core curricular class that we design around the movement opportunities that we provide.

[00:20:47] Um, and that really creates space for girls to grow. I think another really key thing is. That we name what is happening for girls and can attack it once we've [00:21:00] named it. So we don't dance around the idea that social media is creating unrealistic expectations for girls and women in all kinds of areas of their lives.



[00:21:10] We actually name that. We call it out. We have girls, we train girls to notice that and be able to point to it so that they can say, Hey, that's not fair. That's not realistic. That's not equitable. And then we give them the tools to rebuild their own narrative around what it should be

[00:21:27] **Olivia Haas:** [00:21:27] So throughout this season of pep talks. We've been focusing on topics that are related to diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and social justice. How has this work important in your schools when you reflect on your students, varying relationships to health and wellness movement and athletics. Carrie, let's start with you.

[00:21:48] **Carrie Wagner:** [00:21:48] We work with, uh, predominantly low income Latino girls in Los Angeles. And, um, I would say that the health and wellness is really critical. Um, they, there is food scarcity and then there's [00:22:00] also unhealthy food choices, um, with the population that we serve. And so to be able to really get them into a practice of working out first thing in the morning, and then also teaching them like healthy nutrition throughout the day is really important.

[00:22:17] And then also making sure our girls have access to the same sports equipment that girls would get. If they were going to a high-end school access to the same competitions and access to exposure, like the fact that our girls are getting to experience hip hop and yoga and all these different mediums that they wouldn't.

[00:22:37] They wouldn't be experiencing at their, if their traditional homeschool really allows us to be more inclusive, I would say, as, as they move along, I keep like having, well, we don't have anyone that's gone to college yet at GALS LA, cause we're only in year five right now, but I do have dreams of them like maybe they're on college, a college campus and they might not feel [00:23:00] totally settled in yet. And then they see there's a yoga class that's being offered and they go and they realize they can do yoga just as good as anyone else can do yoga, even though that's not really what yoga is about, but you know, the fact that they would feel like they belong, um, is really, really important to me.

[00:23:15] And then also as we go back to our pledge, I know who I am. I know that I matter, I know what matters to me as Carol said, like, just knowing that they matter allows them, I think, to release. Any, anything that society puts on them. I feel like they can just let it fall right off their body because they know that they're worthy and they know that they matter.

[00:23:38] And so I think those are huge, huge parts of the program to help in that area. Yeah.

[00:23:42] **Olivia Haas:** [00:23:42] Carol, what would you like to add?

[00:23:45] **Carol Bowar:** [00:23:45] I'm glad you asked about equity. I think that diversity equity and inclusion, we actually call it. EID, because we believe if

you have equity and inclusion, diversity will follow it's incorporated into the soul of who we are.

[00:23:58] So first is that GALS [00:24:00] in Denver, we pull from every corner of the city. So we have a super diverse population of girls from race to ethnicity, to socioeconomic statuses, to life experiences, to religion, to new arrivals, to the country of the U S. to first, second, third, fourth, fifth generation citizens. Um, multi language speakers, bilingual speakers, monolingual speakers, all, all kinds of diversity shows up at our school.

[00:24:26] Um, when we think about equity and inclusion, we think about it as really being very conscious about equity of access and equity of opportunity in all of the things that we do. So that means accessing your academics, accessing. Um, transportation to school, accessing your ability to audition for something in theater, or to try out for one of our sports teams and then the equity opportunity, being able to take it away, vantage of opportunities that exist.

[00:24:58] And so there [00:25:00] are different things that have to happen for different students to be able to do that. Right. So we try and be really, really conscious when we're, when we build a curriculum. Or a field trip or a special conference day that we're really considering equity of opportunity and equity of access for all of our students.

[00:25:19] So if you overlay that with the gals model, that looks like a lot of things, right? Like we have our core curricular class GALS series, and that is a social, emotional development course. Like everything you need to know as an adolescent that you're not going to learn about in math. For instance, and we really have to differentiate for the life experiences of the girls who are there, especially when we talk about diversity in communities.

[00:25:46] Um, one of the things we do is we do a huge unit around identity, which covers identity of a culture of race, of family, makeup of values, um, all the things that really make up who a girl [00:26:00] is so that girls can be really attentive to what they need, um, and create spaces for them to ask for and provide what they need and even create spaces where they shouldn't have to ask for something, because that's automatically part of how we're thinking about serving our diversity of our population.

[00:26:18] Um, we do consider ourselves a very socially justice based school. We bring a lot of current events into the school building during the day. Um, if we think about the instruction at the Capitol last week, it wouldn't even occur to us to not stop and have a dialogue about that. We want to be able to create that space for them to, um, really learn and understand not only.

[00:26:44] What is happening in the world, but how they can be their best selves and make positive differences in the world.

[00:26:49] **Olivia Haas:** [00:26:49] So what are some lessons you've learned through your work with girls that you'd love to see incorporated into more school?

[00:26:55] **Carrie Wagner:** [00:26:55] So, I mean, we think that moving all throughout the day is really, really important to [00:27:00] the body.

[00:27:00] It's good for the teachers. It's good for the students. So I would love to see schools incorporating more brain boosts into their day. And then, um, the other piece is the social emotional learning, which is what we're all about. So just giving kids the space to express how they're feeling and giving them the tools to deal with the crazy emotions that they're dealing with at this age, I think is really, really.

[00:27:25] Um, beneficial. And I know that schools are moving more in the direction towards SEL, and I'm really, really appreciative of that because I feel like that's really gonna help. Um, but the fact that at gals, we're able to do it every day. And it's just as important as math and science, I think gives it a priority, um, that, that helps these girls, you know, for, for decades to come.

[00:27:48] **Olivia Haas:** [00:27:48] Carol. What would you like to add?

[00:27:50] **Carol Bowar:** [00:27:50] I will share something that a student shared with me once she said Ms. Bauer. One of my favorite things is when I raised my hand in math class and I look around everybody else, who's raising their hand [00:28:00] as a girl. And I think that that really says something about the spaces that we create for young people to be able to express who they are and participate in their academics and in their social, emotional development in school systems.

[00:28:14] I think it's a great idea for identity-based spaces to be created. Um, one of the things that we've really leaned into this year is identity groups based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, um, other types of identifiers where students can just be in a space where they don't have to explain or sensor themselves to be able to feel like they're being heard.

[00:28:39] And, um, that's something that all girls spaces or all girls schools do automatically. But I think that we can do that for other types of identifiers in all kinds of schools. I think another thing that we should really learn from all girls schools and transfer into other types of educational spaces is being super conscious about what kind of gender [00:29:00] socialization and gender norms exists in the world that might be limiting students, girls, boys, non-binary students that might be limiting them from being able to be fully present and fully engaged in whatever it is that they're learning.

[00:29:16] **Olivia Haas:** [00:29:16] Thank you both so much. I appreciate you sharing your insights to how to educate the whole child to succeed academically lead confidently, live boldly and thrive physically.

[00:29:29] Thanks for listening! Like what you heard? Be sure to subscribe to PEP Talks: Podcast on Educational Possibilities and leave a rating and a review. Stay current on the latest NCGS offerings, resources, and research by subscribing to The Coalition Connection newsletter found in the News section at [ncgs.org](http://ncgs.org) and be sure to follow us on Twitter at [GIRLS SCHOOLS](https://twitter.com/GIRLS_SCHOOLS).

PEP Talks is produced by the National Coalition of Girls' Schools: the leading advocate for girls' schools, connecting and collaborating globally with individuals, schools, and organizations dedicated to educating and empowering girls.