

Extracurricular Activities and Student Achievement: Everyone Gains

Research on extracurricular activities and student achievement has been going on for a long time — and just about every nuance of the issue has been explored in some detail. The findings from all of this research are remarkably clear and straightforward, something that is usually quite rare in educational inquiry. The bottom line is stated most succinctly by Everson and Millsap, who titled their 2005 study for the College Board simply “Everyone Gains.”

Early research shows that participation in student activities is linked to better outcomes in a number of domains. The National Center for Educational Statistics (1999) reported that students who participated differed significantly from those who did not in the following ways:

Indicator	Participants	Non-Participants
No unexcused absences	50.4	36.2
Never skipped class	50.7	42.3
Expect to earn bachelor’s degree or higher	68.2	48.2
Have GPA of 3.0 or higher	30.6	10.8
Highest quartile on math & reading assessment	29.8	14.2

NCES also reported that, although awareness of the availability of extracurricular activities is high (up to 98% of kids report knowing about them), participation remains low for poor and minority students. This is particularly distressing because, as Everson and Millsap report in the quote below, these are the kids most likely to benefit from participation in student activities. Participation builds connections to the school community, and helps to overcome one of the most frequently stated reasons students give for dropping out of school: “I felt like I didn’t belong there.”

“Participation in extracurricular activities in high school appears to be one of the few interventions that benefit low-status, disadvantaged students—those less well served by traditional educational programs—as much as or more than their more advantaged peers”

— Everson and Millsap (2005)



The Center for Comprehensive School Reform (CCSR) elaborates further on the relationship between student participation and engagement.

- Students' classroom engagement is related to student participation in activities, especially among kids from poor families.
- Activities help kids build supportive relationships among peers and adult staff, a key component in classroom engagement and college aspiration.
- Structured activity programs create peer groups with higher aspirations and more commitment to academic success.
- Activity programs help promote healthy physical, psychological, emotional and social health.

An important and subtle distinction between student activity programs and other types of programs for at-risk students is noted by Holloway (2000). He says, "such programs provide the opportunity to create a voluntary and positive connection with their school. Conversely, other strategies typically used to address the needs of at-risk students, such as school dropout prevention programs and remedial education, focus on the deficits of students and serve as a catalyst for the formation of deviant groups." As a result, many of the researchers question the practice of excluding students from participation in extracurricular activities because of marginal academic performance. It is those students, most scholars agree, that benefit the most from participation in these activities.

Shostak offers a very helpful summary of the benefits of student activities, even for younger students.

Activities teach universal lessons. Students learn the value of practice, how to apply themselves to a task, and the satisfaction that comes from achievement. Students involved in multiple activities learn how to manage and plan their time, a key skill for success.

Activities build confidence. Students struggling in the classroom may begin to doubt their own abilities and skills. Success in an outside activity can create a sense of confidence that translates into more confident classroom performance. Also, it helps struggling students earn esteem among their peers.

Activities build relationships. Sports, theater, music, and other achievement-focused activities increase opportunities for strong adult relations, mentoring, and positive peer associations.

Activities keep students in a safe, monitored place. Effectively extending the school day, activities help keep kids out of trouble and help to reduce working parents' anxiety about their children.

Activities build character. Participation helps students develop discipline, commitment, tenacity, control and a healthy respect for authority.



The Downside

Is there a downside to participation in extracurricular activities? Yes, but only if they become overwhelming and actually take time away from the student's academic focus. That, however, is rare according to most studies.

Also, Eccles and Barber found that participation in activities tends to increase achievement and reduce student engagement in risky behavior — with one exception. Participants in team sports are somewhat more likely to engage in drinking alcohol than students engaged in music, academic clubs, or service organizations. But, despite the dangers of underage drinking, they also found that "if the risky behavior takes place in the context of a group of highly motivated and otherwise mentally healthy adolescents, it is unlikely that the risky behavior will, in and of itself, have extremely negative consequences. In contrast, if the risky behavior part of a broader syndrome of behaviors and disaffection from ...schools, then the risky behavior is likely to be prognostic of poor subsequent developmental outcomes."

The Bottom Line

Extracurricular activities are one of the best investments that a school can make to help promote achievement, student engagement, and the attitudes and habits that lead to college aspirations and ultimate success. These results are especially profound for minority and low-income students who often have difficulty bonding with the school strictly through academic programs. In fact, student activity programs seem to have better results in reducing drop out behavior than programs that are designed specifically for at-risk students, since these programs tend to concentrate marginal students and focus on deficits rather than providing a productive, voluntary way for students to engage with the school community. Eligibility requirements and fees may be especially problematic for low-income students, and may be an insurmountable barrier to participation.

There is a hierarchy of student activities that promote achievement — with academic activities (clubs, contests), service groups, and arts programs doing a slightly better job than team sports, although differences are small. Furthermore, activities that create opportunities for productive relationships between students and adult mentors are particularly important for promoting achievement and overall school success.

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