

Extracurricular Activities: Adding the “Extras” Our Students Want and Need

By Andrew J. Foust and Dr. Kevin A. Peters



ANDREW J. FOUST



DR. KEVIN A. PETERS

Students’ connection to school is an important protective factor associated with increased attendance and academic achievement as well as a reduction in substance abuse and violence (Hansen, 2021). For some students, reconnecting to school directly contradicts the social isolation they experienced, and perhaps became comfortable with, throughout the pandemic. Finding ways to get all students connected to school should be something we prioritize. One of the ways to encourage students to connect to school is by providing engaging and structured extracurricular opportunities. In our roles as administrator, teacher,

leader, coach, and parent, we have seen

the immeasurable effects extracurricular activities have on students. Extracurricular activities provide a way for students to connect to school, learning, and peers in a less structured way than can be achieved in a classroom.

Physical activities are associated with a more positive overall wellbeing. Other activities help develop social-emotional competencies like collaboration skills, hard work, leadership, and motivation (Sauerwein, Theis, and Fischer, 2016). They also can instill and develop important foundational skills such as responsibility, respect, time management and punctuality, ability to accept redirection and negative feedback, and collaboration skills (Christison, 2013). Many of the skills students can develop through participation in extracurricular activities are ones that will help them in their future careers.

Recently, the Global Google Research Project shared data from a two-year study analyzing the effects of COVID-19 pandemic and the future impacts for both the field of education and the students navigating through it. From this report, there appear to be three trends emerging: global problem solving, modifying skills, and a “shift to lifelong learning mindset” (Kuykendall, 2022). Extra-curricular activities provide children with unique opportunities to grow these characteristics. For some of our students, activities beyond a traditional classroom may be the most optimal way for them to develop these skills.

Global problem solving can be thought of as finding solutions to large scale issues, with many of these future issues involving complex ethical and civic responsibilities. “Beyond problem solving and civic engagement...[is] the

importance of possessing the social and emotional competencies that support cross-cultural collaboration” (Google, 2022, p. 10).

Problem solving is a critical component of most extracurricular activities. Whether it is a football team analyzing every second of the next opponent’s game film, or a robotics team finding the missing piece of code, or a youth group trying to plan their next volunteer retreat, problem solving is a crucial skill needed for success. Allowing students to practice their problem-solving skills at the local level leads to more efficient and effective global problem-solving skills down the road. We cannot expect



Students at York Suburban Middle School participate in their first day of school-wide clubs. The school incorporates extracurricular activities into their school day every other week and offers more than 40 clubs available to all students.

our students to solve problems on a global scale without providing opportunities for problem solving at a localized, relevant level first.

Lifelong learning is an idea remarkably similar to growth mindset, a customary practice in many of today’s classrooms. Lifelong learning takes the approach of extending learning for individuals beyond the traditional years of education, including post-secondary settings. It also

incorporates the idea of learning in various settings and contexts for the learner. As individuals begin to live longer, “a new [voluntary] learning culture must be cultivated, which instills ongoing motivation to learn” (Google, 2022, p. 42).

Extracurricular activities consistently promote a growth mindset for its participants. Athletic teams in season practice as much as possible, whether it is every day in high school athletics or multiple times a week with external club teams. The goal of these practices is simple - improve a little each day to make yourself better and consequently your team better. Clubs and organizations meet on a regular basis to continue refining their interests and passions. Scouting organizations do not go out right away and hike a 100-mile trail. Instead, they grow their strength, camping knowledge, survival skills, etc., to work their way toward their goal. Extracurricular activities are fueled by motivation from the participants, both intrinsically to continue to grow and improve and extrinsically to achieve whatever goal the collective group is working towards.

The following are a few key ideas to consider when developing extracurricular activities:

Start somewhere.

If you do not have any opportunities available for students, begin small. If you have a solid program in place, think about adding one or two more. At our school, the number of opportunities available to students grows throughout the school year. We begin the year with the most practical ones (in relation to time, interest, and cost) and add more as the year progresses and as student interest develops.

Introduce extracurricular activities to students as early as possible.

When thinking about extracurricular activities, most are associated with a secondary setting. Opportunities such as sports teams, drama, robotics clubs, and musical groups are all common activities offered to teenagers.

For elementary school students, there is a decreased opportunity for students to be involved in activities associated with the school. Economically disadvantaged students are often not involved in activities because of the cost associated with clubs and organizations outside of school. Administrators of elementary and intermediate schools should seize any opportunity to incorporate an extracurricular activity into their school culture, even if it is simple. The earlier extracurricular activities are offered, the higher the long-term rewards for the students.

Be creative in what is offered.

Deciding what engaging opportunities to offer can be quite simple...just ask the students. At our school, when students have an interest in developing an activity, they present the idea to a building administrator for approval. If the students do not have an “advisor” for the activity, we help connect them with someone who may be interested. Allowing students to develop their own activities has been highly effective for us in increasing participation. A large majority of the clubs with the highest student participation are those which were created by the students themselves.

Creativity also applies to the timeframe these activities are taking place. Perhaps an elementary school could incorporate an activity session once a week, where students would have the opportunity to participate in teacher-sponsored activities that piqued their interest. This would ensure that all students had equal access to activities while providing a guaranteed time to meet.

Partner with community organizations.

For some schools, finding teachers or advisors who are able to volunteer their time to an extracurricular activity may be limited. Coincidentally, it is not uncommon for local clubs to consistently seek new participants to grow their activity. Administrators may be able to seek out local community organizations to bridge the gap between students and extracurricular activities. Providing a space in the school for these organizations would allow students the opportunity



Two students from York Suburban Middle School participate in the Handheld Gamers Club. They are able to practice interpersonal and relational skills while participating in the friendly competition of video games.

to learn skills not normally taught in a classroom setting without worrying about the logistics of a traditional activity outside of school.

Avoid unintentional denying of students.

We learned a lot about students and families during the shutdown in 2020. We gained a better understanding of some inequities like lack of access to the internet as well as additional responsibilities students had outside of school (ex: being the caretaker of younger siblings). Two approaches that may seem obvious are to provide options that cost nothing to the students and offer as many extracurricular activities as possible during the school day. We know there are students who will never be able to attend any activity after school and/or any that have a cost associated with it due to situations out of their control, so we owe it to them to provide access to as many activities as possible.

It is clear in our post-pandemic world of education that students are craving connections now more than ever. Embedding extracurricular activities into school culture, no matter what the grade level, will not only bring positive academic success for participants but will also develop character traits that will help mold them into successful adults in the future.

For further information, please contact the authors at petersk@etown.edu or afoust@yssd.org. ■

REFERENCES:

- Christison, C. (2013). The Benefits of Participating in Extracurricular Activities. *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, 5(2). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1230758.pdf>
- Google for Education. (2022). *Trend forecast report 2022 - Part 1: Preparing for a new future*. https://services.google.com/fh/files/misc/foe_part1.pdf
- Hansen, W. B. (2021). Adolescent values, interest in extracurricular activities and bonding to school: A cross-sectional descriptive and correlational analysis. *Journal of Character Education*, 17(1), 21+. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A675640986/PROF?u=pl3058r&sid=bookmark-PROF&xid=22fac795>
- Kuykendall, K. (2022, November 29). New report from Global Google Research Project considers the 'Future of Education'. *THE Journal*. <https://thejournal.com/Articles/2022/11/29/New-Report-from-Global-Google-Research-Project-Considers-the-Future-of-Education.aspx?Page=2>
- Sauerwein, M., Theis, D., & Fischer, N. (2016). How youths' profiles of extracurricular and leisure activity affect their social development and academic achievement. *International Journal for Research on Extended Education*, 4(1), 103+. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A533409706/PROF?u=pl3058r&sid=bookmark-PROF&xid=4f25ddca>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: Andrew J. Foust is a STEM & Careers teacher at York Suburban Middle School in the York Suburban School District. Additionally, he serves as an adjunct professor in the mathematics department at Penn State University - Harrisburg. Prior to joining York Suburban, he served as a math teacher at Dallastown Area High School in the Dallastown Area School District. Mr. Foust also served as a soccer coach for the district for 10 years, including three years as the head boys' soccer coach.

Mr. Foust earned his undergraduate degree from York College of Pennsylvania and his master's degree from The Pennsylvania State University in teaching and curriculum. He is pursuing his doctorate in education in K-12 leadership from Aspen University.

Kevin A. Peters, Ed.D., is a Lecturer of Education at Elizabethtown College. Prior to joining Elizabethtown, he served as the principal of Dallastown Area Middle School in the Dallastown Area School District. He is co-director of the New DEEL (Democratic Ethical Educational Leadership) Community Network. He also serves as the coordinator of the New DEEL Mentoring Project. His previous professional experience includes serving as an elementary principal (K-6), special education instructional advisor (K-12) and emotional support teacher.

Dr. Peters earned his undergraduate degree from York College of Pennsylvania, a master's degree in special education from McDaniel College and a doctorate in educational leadership and policy studies from Temple University.

Submit a Review for Magazine Feature...



We are seeking educational book reviews for our newest magazine column, "READERS FOR LEADERS"; but only for books that you have found valuable and would "recommend" to your colleagues. Educators are constantly looking for new ideas to use and share, but do not always have time to read new books. It is our hope that this column will provide you with the latest in contemporary readings.

Book reviews should be 350-400 words and must be submitted as a Word document (with a brief biographical sketch and a photo of the author). Authors may not be the book's author since the purpose of the review is **to provide information and NOT to sell books!** In addition, authors **MUST include a written statement of any connection to the publication being reviewed. The deadline to submit a book review for the fall edition is August 18, 2023.**