

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF:

THE IMPORTANCE AND ACCESSIBILITY OF STUDENT ACTIVITIES

Issue at a Glance

Almost all schools in the United States offer several student activities ranging from athletics, music, and drama to honor societies, clubs, service learning, and student councils. Some activities also include core subjects like mathematics and English when students attend them for remediation purposes. Although often termed “extracurricular” activities, they provide students with important developmental opportunities not always afforded during the regular school period.

Activities can be classified into four distinct categories:

- Direct extensions of required or elective courses (e.g., science club, math club, and dance club), including opportunities to participate in student national recognition programs administered by National Principals Association (e.g., National Elementary Honor Society (NEHS), National Junior Honor Society (NJHS), National Honor Society (NHS), and National Association of Student Councils (NASC).
- Clubs or activities that are expressions of student interest that may be interdisciplinary in nature or not have a direct curricular link (e.g., popular music, dance, chess, editorial magazine, debate, service-oriented, and skateboarding club).
- Student council or student government opportunities for students to engage in the democratic process and have a voice in the life of the school to the extent allowable by law, policy, or tradition.
- Interscholastic and intramural athletics that provide students with opportunities for development through sports (e.g., football, track, tennis, and cheerleading).

Research has documented the academic and social benefits of student activities. Students who participate in these activities achieve higher grades, are more motivated, have fewer discipline problems, are less likely to drop out of school, and are more likely to graduate and apply to college. They have improved academic performance through the development of concentration and time-management skills. Furthermore, limited access to these activities can hinder the development of social belonging and identity during adolescence.

The benefits are particularly significant for at-risk students, for whom student activities have been found to reduce juvenile crime, provide a sense of connectedness to the school and to their peers, increase self-esteem, drive, and skill, and create positive social networks they might not otherwise have access to.

Historically, funding for these school-sponsored activities has traditionally been generated through a variety of sources, including annual budget allocations, fundraising events, or other revenue streams such as vending machines. With limited budgets and a trend of moving away from vending machines, schools often struggle to keep activities available to students. To account for funding shortfalls, fees are often charged to

develop, sustain or expand these offerings. This “pay-to-play” trend causes fees to range widely from \$15 to \$2,000 a year in some cases. These fees are sometimes assessed to all students, though more frequently, only to those students who participate in activities.

U.S. Census Bureau data and related studies reveal a significant “activity gap” in extracurricular participation tied directly to household income levels. This may explain why students in households at or above 200% of the poverty level are much more likely to participate in sports and lessons than those below the poverty threshold. In 2020, 47% of children in families at or above 200% of the poverty level participated in sports, compared to only 23% of children in households below the poverty level—a gap where the higher-income group is more than twice as likely to participate. This disparity is driven by a combination of rising private costs, decreasing school funding, and significant logistical barriers facing low-income families.

The pay-to-play trend has triggered a legal, philosophical, and educational equity debate. The question centers on whether student activities are part of the free public school system to which everyone is entitled by law. Those in favor of assessing fees argue that activities are not a fundamental part of the education process rising to the level that would require them to be provided at no cost. Those opposed to the pay-to-play system argue that student activities are as important to the school program as academic classes. The debate remains ongoing, and states vary widely in their definition of free education.

California, New York, and Oklahoma require that any school-sponsored curricular or cocurricular activity be offered free of charge. Some states, such as Texas and Utah, allow schools to charge fees, but require that a waiver process be implemented for low-income students. Other states consider that such activities are not essential, therefore should not necessarily be publicly funded. Furthermore, the pay-to-play model is not implemented uniformly in states where it is allowed. School districts may implement pay-to-play on an as-needed basis, creating further inequities from district to district.

National Principals Association Position

- Student activities and programs are a critical component of a student's education. Students, by law, are entitled to a free public education, and therefore, the students and/or their parents and guardians should not bear the financial responsibility for any school- or school-district-sponsored programs, activities, or courses. At the same time, schools should not have to bear the financial burden of finding additional funds to cover these expenses. It is up to lawmakers to provide adequate funding for public schools to ensure that all students can participate in activities and programs that are a key part of education.
- Student activities are educational in nature and should be considered part of the school's core mission. They provide an important point of student connection to trusted adults and mentors outside of the classroom, and they also foster a sense of pride and belonging in the school community.
- Student activities support the goal of teaching students to be responsible and give them opportunities to develop character, critical thinking, problem-solving, team building, and leadership skills.
- National Principals Association uses “student activities” in place of “extracurricular,” because we believe that all programs, activities, and courses which are sponsored by the school or school district should align with their mission and should not be seen as “extra” in nature.

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- Research has shown a strong relationship between participation in student activities and academic achievement. Student activities also enhance the attendance and educational mission of schools. They play an important role in mitigating risk factors for at-risk students.
- American public schools seek to educate all students through programs, activities, and courses—regardless of socioeconomic, ethnic, gender, or racial status. Appropriate, reliable resources should be provided to fulfill such an important function at schools.

Recommendations for Policymakers

- State agencies should make resources available to public schools for the purpose of providing students with an array of school-sponsored activities that complement the curriculum. Schools should, under no circumstances, bear the financial burden of finding funds to cover these expenses.
- Recognize all activities approved by elementary through high school levels for their contributions to the school's overall goals for young people.
- Any program, activity, or course sponsored by the school or district—regardless of when it is offered—must be paid for with public funds. Such costs should not be the responsibility of students and their parents. School districts should be allowed to develop their own frameworks and processes around access or level of participation in student activities that allow individual students not enrolled in a school to participate. State governments and state athletic associations should respect these decisions and not create one-size-fits-all policies.

Recommendations for District Leaders

- Encourage schools to engage as many students as possible in student activities and athletics and offer sufficient variety to appeal to a wide range of student interests.
- Advocate for reasonable and appropriate funding that will allow schools to offer important student activities and athletics.

Recommendations for School Leaders

- Ensure staff directing student activities receive professional development in responsibility and appropriate compensation for the work provided while fulfilling this supervisory duty.
- Avoid establishing a hierarchy of student activities that leads to funding competition.
- Ensure that student activities are age-appropriate; nondiscriminatory; well-planned, organized, and implemented; supervised by professional staff; and evaluated on a regular basis.
- Encourage students, particularly those at-risk or disengaged, to participate in student activities.