

A Little Extra: The hidden success behind extracurricular involvement and availability in less affluent schools

By: Kevin Griffin

I. Introduction

National education achievement programs such as *The Common Core Standards* (“Common Core”) and *No Child Left Behind* are part of the nationwide effort to improve English and math literacy in American schools, grades K-12.¹ These programs aim to “provide students, parents and teachers with a clear understanding of what students are expected to learn at every grade level, and as such, serve as a roadmap to quality education.”² While it is too early to tell if they have had a lasting significant impact on education, their development was inspired by the need to increase literacy and proficiency in math and reading for American school students.³

In lower performing, less-affluent schools, the need to meet the requirements set out by the common core and No Child Left Behind has coincided with another effect: the decrease in availability, effectiveness and importance of extracurricular activities (“extracurriculars”) in these schools.⁴ Low performing schools, already facing the most pressure from the push to improve test scores, have prioritized in-class standardized test preparation over offering non-traditional courses, programs

¹ As prescribed in the “Common Core State Standards for Illinois” (p. 3) (2010).

² *Supra* at p. 4

³ *Supra*

⁴ For purposes of this paper, an extracurricular can be defined as a school-sponsored activity which is not part of the normal curriculum of schools. Extracurriculars are not limited to after school activities, but also include activities which may occur during school hours (i.e. school yearbook or school newspaper.)

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and activities. While extracurricular availability is important to the academic lives of every student, it could be more substantially important to less affluent students, whose schools are characterized by the shortcomings that extracurriculars improve. Extracurriculars positively effect student's lives inside and outside the classroom, with some research suggesting those effects may even translate into better test scores.

This paper will demonstrate how increased availability of and participation in extracurriculars can positively influence the overall school climate as well as individual student performance in less affluent schools.

II. Background

A. Education Spending Cuts and the Effect on Less Affluent Schools

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities concluded that this year, despite being in recovery from a recession, most states are funding schools even less than before the recession.⁵ Among the findings, it claims 34 states are providing less education funding than they did before the recession and 15 states are providing less per pupil funding for the 2013-14 school year than they did for 2012-13.⁶ When faced with budgeting issues, schools are left with two choices: increase revenue or make significant spending cuts. Evidence shows there has been a disproportionate reliance on the latter.⁷ The effect has been a disproportionate slashing

⁵ Leachman, Michael, and Chris Mai. *Most States Funding Schools Less Than Before the Recession*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (2013)(p.1). <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=4011> (Statistics calculate for inflation)

⁶ Leachman and Mai, *Supra* (p.1)

⁷ Leachman and Mai, *Supra*, Between 2008 and 2012, states closed 45 percent of budget gaps through spending cuts and only 16 percent through revenue increases. (P. 6).

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extracurriculars, which schools feel cannot effectively teach skills tested by the Common Core or *No Child Left Behind* (reading, writing, math and science).⁸

The effects of spending cuts are also disproportionately administered.⁹ As a result of less affluent districts inability to increase revenue through taxes, the less affluent students attending these schools, see a disproportionate amount of cuts in their extracurriculars.¹⁰ An article published in the *Illinois School Board Journal* found direct evidence of this effect in Illinois Public Schools.¹¹ In Illinois, school districts that had an equalized assessed valuation (“EAV”) of more than \$100,000 per pupil, provided 48 percent more clubs and activities than school districts with an EAV that was less than \$100,000.¹² One of the wealthiest districts in Illinois offered 151 clubs and activities (not counting sports) while one of the poorest offered only 17.¹³ Nationwide, activity programs make up anywhere from 1 to 3 percent of a school’s education budget, however, in lower performing school districts, that percentage drops to less than one.¹⁴

The disproportionate effect of spending cuts has decreased extracurricular opportunity for students in less affluent schools

⁸ Leachman and Mai, *Supra* (p.6).

⁹ Khimm, Suzy. “In budget cuts, low-income students suffer more than wealthy ones.” Msnbc.com (2013). <http://www.msnbc.com/all/budget-cuts-low-income-students-suffer>

¹⁰ Khimm, *Supra*

¹¹ Matula, Joseph. *Clubs and Activities: a hidden benefit of equitable funding*. Illinois School Board Journal (2010)(p.1). http://www.iasb.com/journal/j030410_05.cfm

¹² Matula, *Supra* (p.2)

¹³ Matula, *Supra*, (New Trier High School in Illinois offered 151 clubs and activities while Kankakee offered only 17) (p. 2).

¹⁴ Matula, *Supra* (In 2007, Chicago Public Schools assigned only 1/7 of 1 percent of its budget to after school activity programs. Charlotte-Mecklenburg (North Carolina) assigned 1/3 of 1 percent and Seattle Public Schools in 2008 assigned only 1/9 of 1 percent of its budget to after-school activity.) (p.2)

B. The Characteristics of a Low-Performing School

Because the extracurricular effectiveness depends heavily on student perception and participation, the way less-affluent students perceive their schools is important. A study published in *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, examined at-risk students' perceptions of traditional public schools in which they had previously struggled.¹⁵ The study concluded that students felt their experiences with traditional schools were characterized by: 1) poor teacher-student relationships, 2) a lack of safety, 3) overly rigid authority, and 4) problems with peer relationships.¹⁶ Students felt that these characteristics prevented them from succeeding in a traditional setting.¹⁷

Childrenatrisk.org, a non-profit research and advocacy organization dedicated to making Texas public school quality information easily accessible to parents, considers a number of characteristics in identifying Texas' at-risk schools.¹⁸ Among the characteristics are: attendance rates, graduation rates, number of ACT/SAT test takers, percentage of economically disadvantaged students as well as traditional factors such as reading, math and science scores.¹⁹ The characteristics that "Children at Risk" considers resemble the common approach taken by education policy makers and researchers; a holistic approach weighing test scores, attendance rates, graduation rates and socioeconomic makeup. While these

¹⁵ Lagana-Riordan, Christine, et al. *At-risk students' perceptions of traditional schools and a solution-focused public alternative school*. Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth. (2011)(p. 107) http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10459880903472843#.U2B2hoWaJ_k

¹⁶ Lagana-Riordan, *Supra* (p. 108-09)

¹⁷ Lagana, Riordan, *Supra* (p.109)

¹⁸ <http://childrenatrisk.org/research/school-rankings/methodology/> (description of the method used to determine which public schools in Texas are at-risk).

¹⁹ *Supra*

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characteristics differ from those which children had identified in Lagana-Riordan's study, both combine for a comprehensive way to identify differences in poorly performing, less affluent schools and their higher achieving counterparts.

C. The Benefits of Vibrant Extracurriculars

The vast majority of research on extracurriculars in American schools finds that students who participate in at least one extracurricular perform better in school. A study from the *National Center for Education Statistics* ("NCES") concluded that extracurricular participation is positively correlated with consistent attendance, academic achievement, and aspirations for continuing education beyond high school.²⁰ Studies have also concluded that students involved in extracurriculars receive better grades than those who are not.²¹ This effect can be credited to the extracurriculars ability to teach students character building lessons, teach lifelong skills as well as motivate students who otherwise would have fallen behind or dropped out.²²

Students involved in extracurriculars also develop more positive attitudes toward school.²³ This is attributed to the fact that students who don't like school are not as motivated to stay in school or work towards graduation.²⁴ Yet, when students

²⁰ *Extracurricular Participation and Student Engagement*, National Center for Education Statistics. (1995)(p.1) <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs95/web/95741.asp>.

²¹ Hollrah, Rachel. "Extracurricular Activities" *Iowa State University*. (2001). <http://www.public.iastate.edu/~rhetoric/105H17/rhollrah/cof.html>. (citing Rombokas, Mary, *High School Extracurricular Activities and College Grades* (October 1995).

²² Hollrah, *Supra*, (p. 1-2).

²³ Massoni, Erin. *Positive Effects of Extra Curricular Activities on Students*, *Essai: Vol. 9, Article 27*. (2011)(p. 84) <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol9/iss1/27>.

²⁴ Massoni, *Supra*, (p. 85).

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develop a positive attitude toward school, those attitudes and motivations shift.²⁵

Similarly, research suggests a positive correlation with extracurricular involvement and school completion.²⁶

III. Argument

A. The Effect of Extracurriculars on low-performing school characteristics

To combine the previously discussed student as well as research perceptions, poorly performing schools are characterized by: (1) poor teacher-student relationships, (2) a lack of safety, (3) poor interaction among other students (4) poor graduation and attendance rates, and (5) poor overall performance on typical reading, writing and math metrics.²⁷ Extracurriculars have proven positive effects in each category.

1) Improved Teacher and Student Relationships

A characteristic of extracurricular activities is the presence and oversight of one or many adults. In most instances, these adults are already school employees, hired to take on the role of program sponsor at the end of the school day. Students involved in extracurriculars are heavily influenced by the social network his or her given activity(s) creates.²⁸ While this network includes influence from peers, one study acknowledges that it also includes the positive effects that come from the

²⁵ Massoni, *Supra*, (p. 85).

²⁶ Massoni, *Supra*, (p. 85).

²⁷ See page 4. (Combination of data collected from study on low performing student's attitudes towards school as well as how one non-profit advocacy group defines at-risk schools.) Lagana-Riordan, Christine, et al. *At-risk students' perceptions of traditional schools and a solution-focused public alternative school*. Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth. (2011)(p. 107) http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10459880903472843#.U2B2hoWaJ_k; <http://childrenatrisk.org/research/school-rankings/methodology/>

²⁸ Mahoney, Joseph L., *School extracurricular activity participation as a moderator in the development of antisocial patterns*. Child Development, 71.2 (2000)(p. 513). (Academic study conducted to determine how participation in extracurriculars effects development of anti-social behavior in at-risk youth.)

relationship with an adult.²⁹ Mahoney's study finds that leadership by a competent adult is one of the four necessities for a quality extracurricular program.³⁰ A competent adult would have the ability to build a relationship with students outside of a classroom environment, fostering a new level of relationship. If that relationship can carry over to a classroom, it would improve student-teacher relationships for those involved in extracurriculars.

2) Improved Student Interaction and Safety

A clear benefit of extracurricular participation is the encouragement of peer interaction.³¹ The peer interaction that comes from extracurricular participation can be especially strong in that it often involves students with similar interests, naturally driven to the same extracurriculars.³² Extracurriculars which involve inter-gender interaction or group work has even been shown to positively effect poor student interaction caused by gender stereotypes.³³ Fredricks study suggests that improved social adjustment for students participating in extracurriculars may be linked to their ability to improve resilience and positive development when faced with the challenges an extracurricular can present.³⁴

Less affluent students who had characterized their traditional school experience as a climate lacking in safety, attributed this to a high prevalence of

²⁹ Mahoney, *Supra*.

³⁰ Mahoney, *Supra*.

³¹ Fredricks, Jennifer and Simpkins, Sandra, *Promoting Positive Youth Development Through Organized After-School Activities: Taking a Closer Look at Participation of Ethnic Minority Youth*. Child Development Perspectives. Volume 6, Number 3 (2012) (p. 282.)

³² Massoni, Erin, *Positive Effects of Extracurricular Activities on Students*, "Essai" Vol. 9 Article 27 p. 86.

³³ Massoni, *Supra*.

³⁴ Fredricks, *Supra*.

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bullying and violence at the low-performing schools in which they previously attended.³⁵ Improvements in student interaction, effected by increased participation in extracurriculars, would facilitate a safer school environment. Through extracurriculars, students get to know each other better as well as develop collaborative skills. Extracurriculars, specifically after school, also cut down on the prevalence of violence in schools.³⁶ According to the U.S. Department of Education, teens are most at risk of committing violent acts between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., when they otherwise would be in an after-school extracurricular.³⁷ When the students are able to stay out of after-school trouble, their positive habits would presumably carry over into the classroom.

3) Improvement of Graduation Rates

Research of extracurriculars strongly suggests that those involved in one or more are less likely to drop out of school and more likely to graduate high school.³⁸ Extracurricular participation increases a student's attachment to his or her school, decreasing the likelihood of dropping out.³⁹ Similarly, extracurriculars increase school completion factors such as, "consistent attendance, academic achievement,

³⁵ See page 4. Lagana-Riordan, Christine, et al. *At-risk students' perceptions of traditional schools and a solution-focused public alternative school*. Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth. (2011)(p. 107) (study discusses interviewing at-risk students who described their traditional school as being an environment which lacked safety.)

³⁶ Girod, Mark, et. al., *After-School Clubhouses and At-Risk Teens*. American Secondary Education, Vol. 32 No. 3 (2004)(p. 64) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41064523> (study on the effect of after-school computer programming extracurricular activities on at risk teens)

³⁷ Girod, *Supra*.

³⁸ "Extracurricular Participation and Student Engagement" *National Center for Education Statistics*. (1995) <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs95/web/95741.asp>. (citing Lamborn, S.D., Brown, B.B., Mounts, N.S., & Steinberg, L. *Putting School in Perspective: The influence of family, peers, extracurricular participation, and part-time work on academic engagement*. Student engagement and achievement in American Secondary schools.)

³⁹ Lamborn, *Supra*

and aspirations for continuing education beyond high school.”⁴⁰ Students who participate in extracurriculars are also more likely than non-participants to have no unexcused absences, never skip class, and have a GPA higher than 3.0.⁴¹

4) Improvement in Student Performance

A determination of how extracurriculars directly effect student academic achievement is not as universally agreed upon as some of the other benefits of extracurriculars. However, some researchers would argue that the benefits are clear. One study suggests that at-risk students become so enthusiastic about success they may achieve in an extracurricular, that they are more motivated to work harder in the classroom.⁴² Other commentators suggest that when students are busy with extracurriculars, they exercise more focus in the limited time they have to complete school work.⁴³ Additional studies have found that certain extracurriculars have an ability to draw students to certain academic topics.⁴⁴ Specifically with regards to science, Holloway writes that students who have the opportunity to participate in a less threatening extracurricular environment, feel more competent and translate the confidence into classroom success.⁴⁵

Better grades for students who participate in extracurricular activities is also attributable to “No Pass No Play” laws, which require students to pass all school

⁴⁰ Lamborn, *Supra*

⁴¹ Lamborn, *Supra*

⁴² Girod, Mark, et. al., *After-School Clubhouses and At-Risk Teens*. American Secondary Education, Vol. 32 No. 3 (2004)(p. 72) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41064523>

⁴³ Massoni, Erin, *Positive Effects of Extracurricular Activities on Students*, “Essai” Vol. 9 Article 27 p. 86

⁴⁴ Holloway, John, *Extracurricular Activities and Student Motivation*, “Education Leadership” Vol. 60 No. 1 (2002)(p.2). <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept02>

⁴⁵ Holloway, *Supra*.

courses in order to participate in extracurriculars.⁴⁶ Many states have adopted similar laws, with the effect being that students keep up grades to prevent failing out.⁴⁷ Additionally, students feel pressure from teammates or other members of the extracurricular to keep up grades for fear of not being allowed to participate.⁴⁸

Overall, the benefits of extracurriculars are specifically tailored to the needs of low-performing schools. Extracurriculars improve overall school climate, effecting school safety as well as relationships between teachers and students. For more traditional metrics like test scores and graduations rates, extracurriculars reinforce habits of good students through social pressure and influence.

IV. Conclusion

In analyzing the characteristics of poorly performing schools and the effect extracurriculars, it is clear that schools could see significant benefits in adopting an aggressive approach to increasing extracurricular availability. While the greatest boundary to offering a wide selection of extracurriculars is the cost, research suggests that the benefits both inside and outside the classroom would save money in the long run. The framework for the common core standards, adopted by most states, serve as a good example for the future direction of extracurricular enrichment. In the same way that the common core standards don't mandate forms of teaching, future state adopted standards for extracurricular enrichment should include suggestive guidelines to promote and develop vibrant extracurriculars.

⁴⁶ Hunt, Dianna. *Fewer Failing Grades since start of no-pass rule* Houston Chronicle. (1985).
<http://archive.today/Pe3C>

⁴⁷ Massoni, Erin, *Positive Effects of Extracurricular Activities on Students*, "Essai" Vol. 9 Article 27 p. 86

⁴⁸ Massoni, *Supra*.

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Additionally, future standards should set benchmarks for adequate levels of student participation.

The most recent forms of government incentive programs or state mandated educational programs (i.e. “No Child Left Behind” and “The Common Core”) specifically target student achievement in the classroom through standardized testing. As this research indicates however, students’ availability to experience success outside of traditional school offerings has been diminished. Vibrant and strongly structured extracurriculars have a substantial effect on the overall success of a student and can similarly improve school climate and performance.