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The Learning Leader / The Extracurricular Advantage

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To create the most positive classroom environment possible, education leaders must consider not only what happens inside the classroom, but also everything that affects students throughout the day.

Extracurricular experiences are an important ingredient in this recipe.

Various researchers have noted a strong association between student involvement in extracurricular activities and improved attendance, behavior, and academic performance (Black, 2002; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Fujita, 2006; Holloway, 2002). But these findings don't address the chicken-and-egg question, Does involvement in extracurricular activities actually improve outcomes for individual students, or do better students simply tend to get involved in more extracurricular activities? One high school's experience suggests that a concerted effort to increase extracurricular offerings and participation can contribute to schoolwide academic improvement.

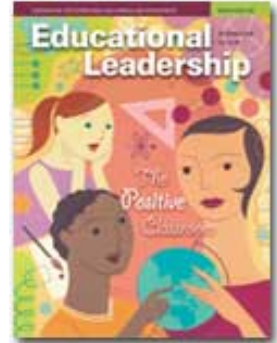
What's Happening at Woodstock?

Woodstock High School in Woodstock, Illinois, serves almost 2,000 students, more than 20 percent of whom are ethnic minorities and more than 25 percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. When I spoke with Principal Corey Tafoya in June 2008, I learned that the school has recently achieved dramatic improvements in student achievement on almost every count.

Ninth grade failure rates in math, science, social studies, English, and physical education are all down substantially, with math failures down almost 40 percent in a single year. The school is producing more National Merit honorees than ever before and, in the past five years, has doubled the number of students taking and passing advanced placement exams, even as the percentages of low-income students, minority students, and English language learners have increased. The graduation rate, at 88 percent, is the highest in 10 years. Discipline has also improved; fighting incidents have dropped to one-half the number of the previous year.

As Tafoya points out,

It's about expectations and relationships. There really were no changes in discipline policies and procedures except that we added in-school suspension with in-school



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tutoring. The biggest impact on improved student behavior has been our improved relationships among teachers, administrators, and students. We learn the name of every student, and we really care about them.

Of course, we should be careful about claiming a single cause for a particular improvement—one of the most important lessons in analyzing education research is that life is multivariate. Broad-based improvements like those at Woodstock undoubtedly result from the confluence of many factors, including hard-working teachers and administrators, a supportive community, a strong curriculum, and good assessment. But Woodstock had all of those things in the past. One clear, measurable change that took place simultaneously with Woodstock's improved outcomes was a dramatic increase—more than 400 percent in five years—in student participation in extracurricular activities, including athletics, academics, ethnic identity clubs, cultural groups, and many others. When asked about his strategies for increasing student involvement in extracurricular activities, Tafoya told me,

If we have six or seven students interested in something, we'll start a new club. We want students to find a reason to get up and come to school. Whatever trips their trigger is what our teachers and administration are willing to do.

Parents and teachers might fear that when students become too busy with nonacademic activities, they will lose their focus on schoolwork. The data from Woodstock suggest the opposite. When the school analyzed the numbers, it found that students who took part in three or four extracurricular activities during the year had dramatically better grades than those who participated in no extra-curricular activities (although increasing the number of extracurricular activities above four did not appear to produce any consistent additional advantage).

Woodstock's experience suggests that when a school makes a commitment to increase extracurricular participation, the entire school community benefits. I have witnessed similar phenomena at the middle school and elementary school levels, when principals and teachers create clubs, sports, and activities for students and then witness improvements in behavior, attendance, and academic performance. The peer pressure associated with extracurricular activities may be one reason for the improvement. "Hey, don't cut school—we *need* you on the team!" may be more powerful than the threat, "Hey, if you cut school, you're going to get a low grade!"

Policy and Practice Challenges

Although we cannot conclude from the data that extracurricular activities alone *caused* these improvements, we can say with virtual certainty that when we help a student move from no participation in extracurricular activities to engagement in three or four such activities, it does not harm academic performance. In fact, we can make a strong case that the positive peer and adult relationships, organization, discipline, expectations, and other positive influences associated with extracurricular activities are likely to improve performance. Expanding extracurricular activities carries little or no risk and has the potential for substantial gain.

Budgets are tight, and extracurricular activities cost money. But think of what each course failure and course repetition costs your school, and consider what each dropout costs the entire

community. Now compare those costs to the minimal investment required to create a new club, activity, or team—or to add more students to the clubs, teams, and activities that your school already offers.

The policy challenge is this: The students who would most benefit from extracurricular activities—those with zero participation, poor academic performance, inadequate attendance, or poor behavior—are most likely to be barred from such activities by school or district policies. Flunking math? You're off the team! Cut 10 classes? You're ineligible.

What would happen if, instead, we actively recruited struggling students for clubs, teams, and other activities? The next time your school is casting the spring play, scouting for debate team members, starting a new social action club, or recruiting members for a sports team, cast a wide net. The students you encourage might help your team, and your entire learning community, have a better year.

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