

Middle schoolers may benefit academically from extracurricular activities

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Activities outside the classroom - especially community engagement and sports - may help low-income, urban youth academically as they transition into middle school, according to a new study by NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

The findings, published online in the *American Journal of Community Psychology*, suggest that participating in [extracurricular activities](#) may be protective for low-income youth by providing a setting for development outside the classroom.

Middle school is an important yet vulnerable time for youth. Studies have shown that the middle grades are a critical period for identity formation and are central to students' later academic trajectories, but students - especially low-income, urban youth - may experience declines in both grades and school attendance.

While extracurricular activities have been linked to good academic outcomes in elementary and [high school students](#), little research has focused on low-income middle schoolers and whether activities can play an important role developmentally for them.

"If we believe this decline in academics and engagement is happening because [middle schools](#) don't fit with what early adolescents need, then perhaps these other spaces can provide opportunities for some of those needs to be met," said Kate Schwartz, a doctoral student in the Psychology and Social Intervention program at NYU Steinhardt and the

study's lead author.

The researchers looked to a dataset of 625 low-income students from 14 New York City elementary schools, collected as part of the Adolescent Pathways Project. The students were surveyed in their final year of elementary school and first two years of middle school. The survey included a range of questions about students' extracurricular activities, including the activity settings - school, community, religious, or athletic - and frequency of participation.

The researchers found that a large percentage of urban youth did not participate in extracurricular activities on a regular basis. For those involved in extracurricular activities, their patterns of participation varied from year to year and as they moved between activities, which the researchers attributed to early adolescence being a time for experimenting, trying on identities, and finding a community.

Participating in extracurricular activities in the community, such as volunteering, was found to be the most highly associated with better [academic performance](#). Athletic participation was also linked to better grades.

"Middle schools can be larger, more anonymous schools where you don't feel like you fit in or belong. If you can find extracurricular activities that help you feel like you're good at something and you feel like trying hard pays off, you might apply that back to your schoolwork," Schwartz said. "It was interesting to see that the most protective setting for activities was one where you're involved in something larger than yourself and helping others or your community."

The study did not find a significant association between [school](#)-based activities and academic performance, and found that religious activities were actually linked to lower academic outcomes. The researchers noted

that because detailed information on the quality of each activity wasn't captured in the survey, more research is needed.

"We still need to better understand what extracurricular opportunities exist for urban youth that will promote development, and whether they have enough choice between activities," said Schwartz. "This study offers a window into this area, but the topic warrants further research."

In addition, the researchers found that a high level of participation in two or more settings was associated with better academic performance. However, exceeding that - participating at a high level in three or more settings - did not appear to be beneficial. Only 7 percent of the study's sample reported such a high level (three or more settings) of participation.

"Students in the middle grades should have extracurricular opportunities - ways for them to get involved in activities that give them agency, a sense of being part of a team, and a sense of accomplishing something," Schwartz said. "I think we all know someone who lit up scholastically, socially, and at home when they found an activity that worked for them."

Provided by New York University

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