

Does 'pay-to-play' put sports, extracurricular activities out of reach for some students?

March 18 2019



The more likely parents were to perceive activities as too expensive for the return, the less likely their kids were to participate. Credit: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health at the University of Michigan

From choir and cheerleading to soccer and student council,

extracurricular school activities keep students engaged—but cost may be among barriers that prevent some children from participating, a new national poll suggests.

Eighteen percent of middle and high [school](#)-age children are not involved in any [extracurricular activities](#) this [school year](#), according to the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health at the University of Michigan. And students from lower income households (\$100,000 a year or less) experience twice the rate of non-participation than peers from families with [higher incomes](#).

"Extracurricular school activities have been shown to boost educational achievement, personal development and [social opportunities](#)," says poll co-director Sarah Clark. "But barriers to participation prevent some children from enjoying the benefits that these experiences offer."

About half of students are participating in school sports, ranging from intramurals to varsity teams, during the 2018-19 school year, while more than 40 percent are involved with arts activities such as music, theater, or dance. About half also participate in a club or other activity, including afterschool clubs and more formal groups such as [student](#) council.

But these activities often come with a cost. Required school participation fees average \$161 for sports, \$86 for arts, and \$46 for clubs and other activities. For sports, 18 percent of students had school participation fees of \$200 or more, compared to 12 percent for arts and 5 percent for clubs and other groups.

When combining participation fees with other expenses, such as equipment and travel, the total cost averaged \$408 for sports, \$251 for arts, and \$126 for other activities.

And the more likely parents were to perceive activities as too expensive

for the return, the less likely their kids were to participate, the poll suggests. Twenty-nine percent of parents say the cost of school extracurricular activities is higher than they expected and 10 percent felt the benefits of activities are not worth the cost—including three times as many lower-income parents.

"Parent views about the cost of school activities is linked to the discrepancy in non-participation among families," Clark says. "Children of parents who didn't perceive benefits outweighing the cost were least likely to being involved in sports, arts or clubs."

"Most schools strive to offer a range of activities, including some that do not require participation fees," Clark adds. "Many schools also offer waivers or scholarships to make activities accessible to all students. Despite these efforts, we are still seeing lower participation among students whose parents perceive the cost is out of reach—perceptions that may be inaccurate."

Two thirds of students participating in arts or clubs had no participation fees, compared to only 46 percent for sports.

"For required participation fees, as well as total costs, school sports are on average more expensive for families than other types of activities," says Clark.

And parents may not know how to alleviate these [costs](#). Just 7 percent of parents have ever requested a waiver or scholarship for participation fees. Nineteen percent didn't know how and 5 percent weren't comfortable requesting assistance.

"Parents concerned about the cost of school activities may not be aware of no-cost options, or strategies that would lower or eliminate fees," Clark says. "These missed opportunities for assistance can impede

children from pursuing their interests."

The nationally representative Mott poll report is based on responses from 961 parents who answered questions about 1,323 children in middle or high school.

Over 80 percent of middle and high school-age children were expected to participate in at least one type of school [activity](#) for the 2018-19 school year.

The income gap in student non-participation is consistent with findings from previous Mott poll reports, and corresponds with income-related attitudes of parents.

Non-participation was also higher among boys than girls (21 percent versus 15 percent.) Top reasons for non-participation among boys were cost, transportation, and having a job while not being interested in activities was cited more often for girls.

"School officials may consider increasing awareness about no-cost activities and waivers as well as emphasizing the benefits of these experiences to hesitant [parents](#)," Clark says. "We should do our best to help every child have the opportunity to explore different interests, make new friends, develop skills and enjoy a well-rounded school experience."

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: Does 'pay-to-play' put sports, extracurricular activities out of reach for some students? (2019, March 18) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-03-pay-to-play-sports-extracurricular-students.html>

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