

All Work and No Play: A Call for a Movement Toward Requiring Extracurricular Involvement

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Introduction

According to the New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA), in May 2012, almost four out of every ten New York school districts cut extracurricular activities or got rid of them altogether. In an overview of the extensive budget cuts that New York State high schools are facing in the coming years, the New York State School Boards Association has revealed that in the upcoming school budgets, 35.9% of districts plan to “reduce or eliminate extracurricular activities/athletics” (*The New Reality*). Extracurricular activities, or ECAs, are any activities that are done outside of the classroom but affiliated with and funded by the school. In my high school, ECAs brought the entire community together. Whether it was the annual Christmas play, *A Christmas Carol*, a Friday night football game, or a charity project, ECAs provided students with a chance to get to know other members of the community while also building relationships with their own classmates and teachers. There is no doubt that budget cuts are a necessary evil, but it is important that schools look the real benefits of ECAs before making them the first place to save money. ECAs should not be cut from budgets; they should be required of all students, and time should be set aside before, during or after the school day so that all students can find some activities from which they can most personally benefit in the classroom, outside of the classroom, and even beyond high school.

The benefits of ECAs are widespread and plentiful. For one, there are multiple studies that show that students who participate in ECAs have improved academic outcomes in the classroom. While there is no evidence of the exact reason for why this is true, and it is clear that there is a correlation between the two. ECAs also can be a huge part of students’ social development. While schools have many requirements that focus on academics, like state tests and standards, there is no time set aside specifically for students to become more adept social

beings. The school is responsible for teaching academic content to the students, but it should also be responsible for molding students into functional members of society who can communicate with various groups of people and are healthy physically, emotionally and psychologically. ECAs are very good tools for teaching students about themselves. When the teams, clubs, and activities are varied and individualized, it gives students a good chance to find something that interests them while also working with people who have these same interests. Identifying these interests can be valuable for students who are trying to decide what they want to do after high school, or even more simply for students who struggle with developing their own self-concept. Lastly, maybe the most overlooked benefit of increased ECA participation is the potential benefit for the entire school environment. More students participating in ECAs means that more staff must be involved in directing these activities. Inevitably, increased staff involvement will lead to a quality rapport between students and staff. This heightened sense of connectedness and community is something that benefits the school and all of those who are actively involved in it.

Obviously, proposing movement toward a requirement of this sort in high schools would not come without questions and objections. For one, it is fair to argue that parents send their kids to school for academics. Parents expect their kids to learn information specific to content and skills specific to reading, writing, and problem solving. Requiring ECAs could take time away from learning this information and acquiring these skills and also would increase the already heavy burden of teachers who are faced with the new teacher evaluation system, APPR (Annual Professional Performance Review). Another possible reason to call this kind of requirement into question is because of its practicality. While some parents and students may see and understand the benefits of being more involved in ECAs, it may not be practical from a financial standpoint, especially with all of the schools that are being forced to make cuts in their budgets. While this

may be one of the biggest obstacles in the way of this proposal, there are ways, such as fundraising committees or donations, that this potential problem could be solved. Despite these factors that are seemingly an obstacle for ECAs having an increasingly larger role in schools, with any change comes hardships. Increased benefits outweigh whatever difficulties may be encountered by implementing such a requirement, and the impact that ECAs can have on a student's present and future is something that cannot be overstated.

ECAs can come in many forms. Depending on the varied level of school resources, student interest, staff, and community capabilities, ECAs look different from one school to the next. Probably the first activity that comes to mind with the mention of ECAs is sports or athletics. In a study conducted by Child Trends Data Bank, an online data base that tracks many trends and statistics involving young people, it was found that more than half of all adolescents, male and female, are a part of their middle or high school athletic team. At a smaller school, there may be a limited offering of athletics for students to participate in. In this type of situation, more "popular" sports like soccer, basketball, football baseball (and more) may be offered while other sports like skiing, bowling, or equestrian may stretch a small school beyond its capabilities.

Athletics are an example of a great form of ECA in that they promote a healthy lifestyle of movement while also having the ability to teach lessons about the value of hard work, practice, teamwork and perseverance. However, ECAs are not limited to athletics only. Clubs, activities and non-athletic teams are also valuable ECAs. Some examples of clubs include drama clubs, chess clubs, art clubs, or community service clubs. Non-athletic teams can consist of mock trial teams and academic teams who compete against other local teams. These ECAs allow students to pursue something that may interest them beyond high school that is found within the curriculum. In the best cases, a connection between a particular ECA and classroom content can

often be made. The potential reciprocation between the two (ECAs an the classroom) is something that should be tapped into and utilized by schools, whenever possible. For example, a strong English student may join a creative writing club because; to that student there is not enough time devoted to creative writing in their regular English class. Or a student that is particularly interested in technology class, but only has had a chance to take it in junior high, may have an opportunity to join a tech club where they can explore their interests at their own discretion.

The varied nature of ECAs is something that reflects the varied nature of students in general. All ECAs have potential for great growth, depending on the time and participation of those involved in them. Similarly, I contend that all students have the potential for great growth in their particular areas of interest, depending on if those interests are available to be pursued in their educational environment.

I. ECAs and Academic Achievement

Educational outcomes are something that schools are deeply interested in improving any way that they can. Schools work to select teachers, administrators, and other supporting staff that are best equipped with experience skills and knowledge to improve students' academic success. Douglas Reeves, founder of the Leadership and Learning Center and writer of the article, "The Extracurricular Advantage," published in the journal *Educational Leadership*, examined a real example of academic improvement and achievement in almost all areas. Reeves writes, "in the past five years, Woodstock 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" (Reeves, 2008). On top of that, Woodstock High School, located in Illinois, also observed a decrease in class failures in every subject and more

National Merit honorees than they have ever had before. It was also noted that “fighting incidents decreased by half” during this time (Reeves, 2008). Reeves interviewed the principal of Woodstock, Corey Tafoya, to find that there were no significant changes made in discipline or procedures that were related to in-class instruction.

While everything seemingly stayed the same over the period of time that there was this noticeable change, there was once notable difference in the school: ECAs. According to Reeves, there was an increase of “more than 400 percent in five years—in student participation in extracurricular activities,” that lined up with increase in academic achievement observed (Reeves, 2008). Tafoya noted the commitment of the school to add or create more activities if there was genuine student interest to do so. Clearly Woodstock High School’s support of its student participation in activities in which they were interested played a part in the school’s dramatically improved academic achievement.

This example from Woodstock High School is not an isolated one. In the article, “The Effects of School Bonding on High School Seniors Academic Achievement,” the group of authors, all deeply involved with educational literature, looked at a group of 10,426 students and how bonding affected their academic achievement. Bonding is defined in the article as the opposite of alienation, or “student connectedness to their school” (Bryan, Julie et al.) and according to the authors it has a direct correlation to extracurricular activities. The study itself looked at many aspects of school including ECAs and ultimately revealed that ECAs clearly have a positive effect on students’ academic achievement. In reflecting upon the statistical analysis of the study, the authors wrote, “Hours per week spent on extracurricular activities and amount of club involvement, measures of school involvement, both had significant positive effects on academic achievement” (Bryan, Julie et al.). This study, coupled with the concrete

example from Woodstock High School, shows that in most cases, requiring ECAs would be beneficial to the academic successfulness of students and to the school environment as a whole.

Critics would argue that there is no evidence of a clear relationship between ECAs participation and educational outcomes, and that there is no way to identify truly what contributed to these outcomes. In his article, “Do Extra-Curricular Activities In Schools Improve Educational Outcomes?” Boaz Shulruf, a college professor and educational researcher, asserts that there is no causality between ECAs and educational achievement. Shulruf conducted a review of studies that examine this relationship, and, according to him, “although the results show associations between participation in ECAs and educational outcomes, causal effects could not be confirmed” (Shulruf, 2010). Another question that Shulruf raises about those who write articles suggesting ECAs being the cause of improved educational achievement is that there may be a writer bias. He contends that writers go into the process of examining these relationships with an expectation, and, therefore, the results are not entirely valid.

It is true that writers should strive to approach an issue with objectivity, but it is fair to contend that those who are directly involved with education have the most authority to examine these kinds of relationships and trends. While Shulruf does raise valid objections to what kind of relationship really exists between ECAs and educational outcomes, the example at Woodstock High School does seem relatively unbiased and valid. Since there were essentially no changes in any other programs or procedures at the school except for the increase in ECAs participation, it can be concluded that there is at least some sort of connection between the two. Whether or not is a causal relationship or not is not necessarily of great importance since it can be determined with little doubt that where there is high participation in ECAs there are also improved educational outcomes.

The topic of ECAs and academic achievement also brings up other questions. How important is achievement when achievement is simply a reflection of test scores? Do these tests provide a perfect way to measure academic achievement? If it can be reasonably determined that grades and tests are not a perfect way to measure academic achievement, then why not try something else? There are possible ways that achievement can be measured for the totality of the student, and not just his or her grades, and ECAs are an integral part of it.

With that in mind, schools must consider what other ways ‘achievement’ can be measured and/or tracked. As previously discussed, ideally ECAs would lead to an overall increased social growth of the students, and also inevitably an increased sense of community in the school as a whole. However, the word ‘achievement’ elicits an intuitive response to look for numbers. While numbers make the results or growth much more clear, a number only holds so much power. In “The Value of Extra-Curricular Support in Increased Student Achievement,” authors Greg Goodman and Phillips Young, both education professors at Clarion University of Penn and University of California, respectively, talk about the role of counselors in helping students decide what kind of ECAs they would be interested in. They state that school counselors should be “enhancers of the educational process” primarily by helping identify and then give them a plan to pursue their interests.

Furthermore, the authors explain, “school counselors should address academic development, career exploration and personal/social enhancement for all students” (Goodman and Young). In many ways, this leaves the question of ‘achievement’ on the school counselors. They get to look at the student in ways that go outside their performance on a State Test. For example, if a student struggles in English but is a gifted auto-mechanic, and pursues those interests and skills in a tech club, then why should the student’s score on the English State Test

be the determining factor of whether or not the student has achieved? More likely than not, this student will be able to achieve as an auto-mechanic without needing to write a critical-lens essay. In no way is this example meant to dismiss the importance of English or any other content, but, quite simply, one area of a student's life should not affect his or her perceived level of 'achievement' significantly. If there are several areas lacking, then a pattern can be spotted and a response can be taken, but it is only fair to keep in mind that everyone has a weakness.

This desire to look at the totality of a student's school work (extracurricular and curricular) puts an increased importance on an already important role player in the school system: the school counselor. This increased role, and what it means for counselors and other school staff will be discussed at a later point in this paper.

II. ECAS and Social Development of Students

It is known, and sometimes dreaded, by students and teachers that successfully passing certain standardized tests are a requirement for graduation from high school. In New York, these tests include state regents tests, sometimes AP tests and also SATs or ACTs, (the required tests differ from state to state). For many of these students, these tests are necessary for their future after school as well. High school students are much more than just a test score, and the role of the school should be more than just preparing students to get scores that reflect proficiency on end-of-the-year tests. Schools should take a more proactive role in developing students as social creatures both in and out of the classroom so that students are not only academically adept to the world around them, but also able to function socially in that world as well. When these students graduate, their test scores will only take them so far, but their social skills will be something that will be valuable wherever they go and whatever they do, for the rest of their lives.

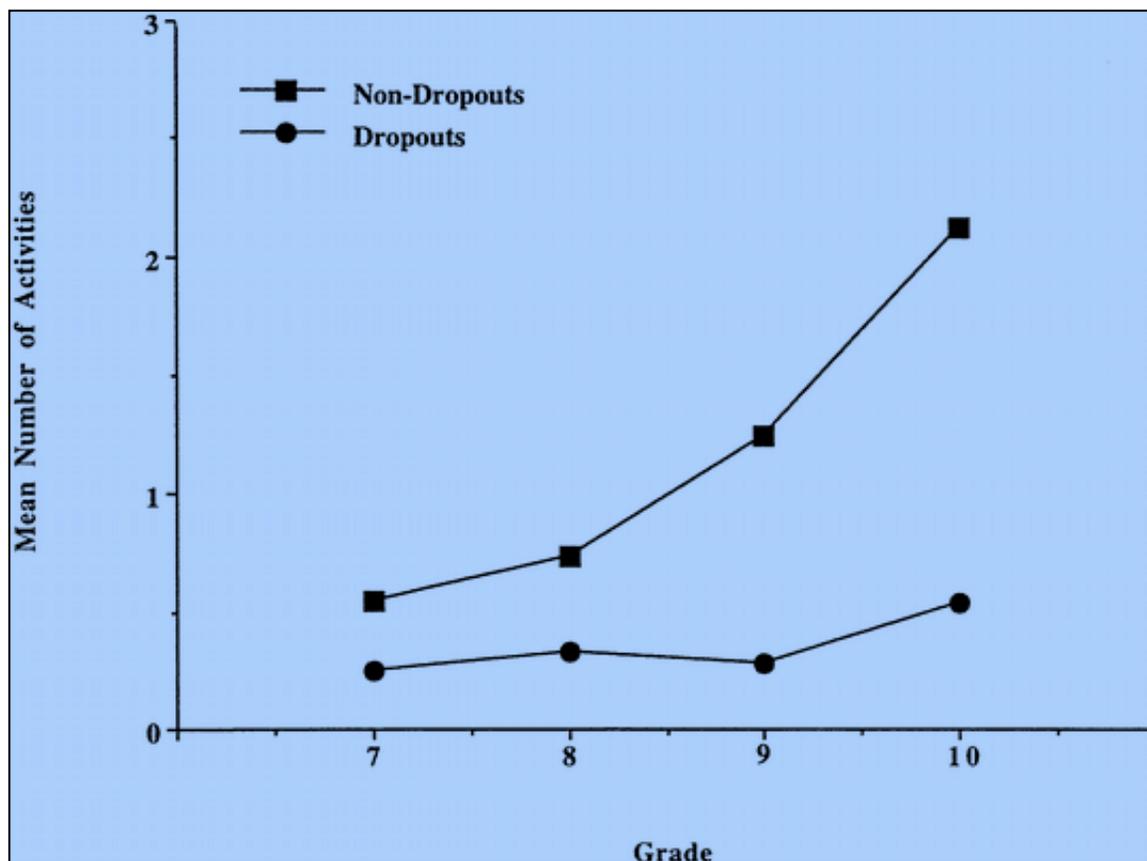
Some schools in the United States are already taking an approach that puts more emphasis on the social culture of the school. One example of this is described in the article, “The Worst Years of Our Lives,” written by *Slate* writers Joshua Glenn and Elizabeth Larsen. The two authors, co-authors of the book *Unbored: The Essential Field Guide to Serious Fun*, write about a system that the school, C.P.R., that is now implemented at Paul Coffee Middle School in Providence, Rhode Island. This acronym stands for Circle of Power and Respect, and it is the foundation of a social contract in the school that is known and enforced by all students and staff. This is a form of extracurricular activity since it is a program that the students participate in outside of their academic schedule. Since the implementation of C.P.R. in the school, 70 percent of students were “proficient in the New England Common Assessment System (NECASS) reading test” (Glenn and Larsen, 2012). According to the article, the results at Paul Coffee Middle School were gained with fewer resources (since the school largely consists of low-income families) than surrounding towns of higher-income families whose scores reflected “42 percent proficiency in reading and 32 percent proficiency in math” on the NECASS (Glenn and Larsen, 2012).

The C.P.R program that is in place at Paul Coffee Middle School emphasizes several aspects of the students’ social development similar to the aspects that ECAs would emphasize. The five components of the “vision” that is C.P.R. consist of respect, cooperation, support, individuality, and resiliency. All of these traits are part of the students’ social development. They all revolve around personal interaction and character strength of both students and staff. Required participation in ECAs, which involve interaction with a variety of people, youth and adults, as well as character building opportunities, could yield similar results as those that are being seen at Paul Coffee Middle School.

While ECAs have the ability to affect social development in the school, they also affect many aspects of students' lives out of school as well. The choices that kids make outside of school sometimes can be as important or detrimental to their future as those decisions that they make in school. The article, "Participation in School-Based Extracurricular Activities and Adolescent Adjustment," written by college professors Nancy Darling of Bard College and Robert Smith and Linda Caldwell of Pennsylvania State, argues that structured leisure time (ECAs) gives teenagers "unique development opportunities" (Darling, Smith, and Caldwell, 2011). Furthermore, statistics suggest that taking part in these leisure opportunities also influenced other decisions that teenagers face. The adjusted scores from one year to the next (taking into account sex, age, parent education, and ethnicity) showed that in comparison to non-participants, participants in ECAs were less likely to use marijuana and drink alcohol. Also, the students in the study who participated in ECAs had more positive aspirations for their life after high school. Furthermore, the scores reflected that compared to the non-participants, participants in ECAs also had higher grades and a more positive outlook on going to school (Darling, Caldwell, and Smith, 2011). From these results, which are derived from an extensive sample of well over 4,000 students, it is clear that ECAs do have an effect on the choices that students make both in and out of the school setting. Whether or not parents think that schools should be interested in developing the social health and well-being of their kids, the choices that kids make at home, or with their friends, can be largely influenced by what they are doing in school. ECAs have the ability to influence kids and provide a setting where positive messages can be integrated into doing what they are interested in.

Early dropout is another youth factor that can be influenced by participation in ECAs. In their article, "Do Extracurricular Activities Protect Against Early School Dropout?" authors Reis

and Colbert conducted a study that examined this relationship between extracurricular involvement and early school dropout. The definition of an “early school dropout” was considered “if a student left school prior to completing the 11th grade” (Mahoney and Cairns, 1997). The study consisted of 392 participants whose participation in ECAs and dropout prevalence was tracked from 7th grade until 10th grade. In Figure 1 below, the number of activities students participated in is compared between dropouts and non-dropouts as they move from 7th to 10th grade.



It is discernable from this graphic representation of the data collected that “dropouts participated in significantly fewer activities at all grades, even several years prior to dropout” (Mahoney and Cairns, 1997). While with most evidence that suggests a correlation between ECAs and an external factor, it is not possible to say that the relationship is casual from this evidence.

However, it would be very difficult to assert that there is not a clear trend for dropout for those students who do not participate in ECAs.

While looking at dropout and negative outcomes is one way of determining the value of ECAs in the lives of adolescents, looking at the positive outcomes of participation in ECAs is another valid option. Reis and Colbert took this approach in a study where they examined 35 youth who lived in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods and attended urban high school. In the article, “Understanding Resilience in Diverse, Talented Students in an Urban High School” the authors looked at the factors that contributed to the success of these students despite their largely negative surroundings. Contrastingly, they also focused on the factors that may contribute to underachieving students and how the two related to each other.

For the highly achieving students, Reis and Colbert found a clear link between their resilience to negative factors and ECAs. Every student who was considered “highly achieving” was also involved with an activity of some sort. The authors write “all (participants in the study) participated in more than one sport and all were also involved in numerous school clubs and activities, including jazz band, foreign language clubs, service groups and academic competitions” (Reis and Colbert, 2004). The authors also explained that the extra time that the students spent being involved with extra activities obviously took away from the amount of time that “had to fall prey to some of the urban problems that troubled their less productive peers, including drugs and gangs” (Reis and Colbert, 2004). These findings support the idea that ECAs have a definitive positive effect on the social development of youth or students. Although there is no definitive reason why, (only many possible reasons) students who are considered “highly achieving” all have one thing in common: their consistent and in some cases extensive

participation in ECAs. This participation is two-fold since spending their leisure time in a structured environment keeps students off of the street and out of potentially unhealthy situations in their urban neighborhoods. Marisa, a participant in the study is a concrete example of this. In a direct quote from an interview, Marisa says, “I have learned not to get involved with anybody that has to do with gangs . . . Instead, I focus on my clubs and my sports” (Reis Colbert, 2004). While this is just one example of how ECAs can deter potentially harmful behavior, it is a strong one.

Since Reis and Colbert focus solely on an urban demographic from disadvantaged communities and, at best, inconsistent home support, it would be beneficial to look at a very different demographic and see how the two compare as far as how extracurricular participation affected them. In a 2003 study that focused almost solely on white middle class working families living in white middle class communities, Jacquelynne Eccles, Bonnie Barber, Margarte Stone, and James Hunt examined the trend between participation in ECAs and “risky behaviors” of 1259 respondents. In order to compile their data, the authors, all of whom received their current level of college education in the field of Family Studies and Human Development, “administered extensive interview(s) with items tapping a wide range of constructs” (Eccles, Barber, Stone and Hunt, 2003). In terms of the “risky behaviors” that were examined in these interviews, the authors asked their participants how many times “in the last six months (that) they had drunk alcohol, gotten drunk, or used drugs” (Eccles, Barber, Stone and Hunt, 2003). In order to look at a variety of ECAs and be able to compare them, they split up ECAs into several categories including team sports, academic clubs and performing arts.

When looking at similar youth factors that Reis and Colbert were looking at (with the exception of gang involvement), Eccles, Barber, Stone and Hunt found that “risky behaviors” such as drinking and drug use was lower in all but one category of ECAs, team sports. The authors explain, “both male and female athletes drank more than non-athletes.” While this was proved to be true, team sports was a “promotive factor for academic outcomes” of all kinds. Given the fact that team sports do make up about half of all ECAs in the United States, it would probably be unethical to say that this trend is not a problem. However, every other ECA predicted lower involvement in risky behaviors. So, similar to the relationship between ECAs and potentially dangerous youth factors in urban settings, students in typically suburban settings displayed a lower participation in dangerous behavior when there was an increased involvement in ECAs.

It is true that the two previous studies only represent two groups of youth, but the drastic difference in the environment that each group was in when the studies were conducted is significant. Many will argue that, generally speaking, children in urban communities have an inherited disadvantage because of a lack of resources and in many cases other dangerous factors like high crime rate, high gun possession, and high substance abuse. Children in predominantly white communities like the group examined in Eccles, Barber, Stone, and Hunt’s article, typically do not see those types of factors in their environment and in many cases, have a much more positive neighborhood and home environment. This is not always the case, but in general, crime rates and those things that are associated with crime are more prevalent in urban settings when compared to suburban or rural settings. In this lies the significance of ECAs in the social development of teens. With these two studies (and many others that could be listed) to compare,

it is clear that ECAs at the very least have the ability to influence the social decision making of teens. Since students from both studies who participated in ECAs were largely less likely to put themselves in potentially dangerous situations, it can be said that ECAs may have the ability to counter environmental factors, whether they are extreme like gang involvement or relatively minor like alcohol use. In both cases, ECAs were a common denominator in students that made better decisions in social circles outside of school.

All of these suggestions and statistical evidence may incite a reaction of displeasure from parents who believe that it is their job and responsibility, not the school's, to develop social and decision-making skills for their kids. It is clear and also expected that kids in school are being socially developed by their parents and there is no doubt that parents have the ability to be positive role models for their kids. Without real parental involvement at home, which will be discussed later in the paper, students are put at a real disadvantage. However, the reality is that for about 180 days a year, and at least seven hours a day, kids are not with their parents. Knowing that there are proven ways to help kids grow and develop as social beings while in school and away from their parents, it would seem senseless to neglect social growth and focus solely on academic/intellectual growth while students kids are at school.

III. ECAS and Post High School Interests

Up to this point, the aspects of an extracurricular requirement in high schools have been examined relative to their strengths for students while they are still in high school. However, the scope of ECAs does not end at high school graduation; the benefits can be beneficial to whatever students decide to do after high school, whether that is college, or entering the work force. By providing students with activities that match with their interests and encouraging students to

pursue new activities in which they are interested, students will be more marketable as future college students and also as future employees.

In her article, “For U.S. College Applicants, Extra Activities Encouraged,” Noor Brara, writer for the *New York Times*, addresses a clear example of just how important ECAs may be for college applicants. Brara spoke with several college admissions officers who expressed the significance of ECAs being on prospective students’ applications. One admissions officer, Micah Sieber, from Vassar College, acknowledged this significance and also offered that they “typically tend to prefer students who spent a significant amount of time in a few clubs over students who spread their time too thinly over many projects” (Brara, 2012). Sieber’s comments have two takeaways. For one, he recognizes that colleges do look at extracurricular involvement when making admissions decisions. Secondly, Sieber makes a key point about how colleges look at ECAs involvement. He believes that student participation should be more focused, or specialized, perhaps. According to Sieber, students should do what interests them and be deeply involved in that, instead of having many activities in which they are not able to be fully involved. *College Explorer* reiterates this same point in the article “Extracurricular Activities and College Admissions” which reads, “colleges want to know that you have a passion and are able to devote your efforts to something” (Extracurricular Activities). Requiring students to participate and supporting them in pursuing their interests, even if it means making a new club or committee, would encourage more time being dedicated to one or two activities, and therefore they would draw more interest from colleges.

While many may think that there are more important components to a college application than ECAs, Brara makes a claim that works against that logic. She says “with so many students applying . . . with strong G.P.A.s and exam scores, the extras on your resumes . . . could help

distinguish you from another student with a similar application” (Brara, 2012). This seems to be quite true, especially since many colleges usually have a minimum SAT or ACT score that they accept. Once all of the applications that meet these scores are sorted, ECAs can give one applicant the edge over another. A student with consistent ECAs involvement is more appealing to colleges than a student with little to no ECAs involvement, if the two students have similar test scores. So, test scores may be a deciding factor for college admission officers, but with so many students achieving at high levels in high schools, ECAs are becoming a way to separate some students from the rest. ECAs not only give students an opportunity to grow academically and socially, but they can also be a tool for students after they leave high school.

ECAS and the Community

The positive affect of ECAs is clear when looking at all of the previous sections. These activities show positive correlations in almost the totality of the students’ lives such as their academic achievement, social development and post-high school interests. Even though the impact on the students’ lives seems obvious, increased ECA involvement would also bring many benefits to the community as a whole. The more students that are participating in ECAs, the more staff there are needed to run the activities. This increased staff involvement may also stretch to parents. In order to keep expanding ECAs and make an activity specific to everyone’s interest, parent volunteers may be necessary. All of these people working toward a common goal makes the feel of community grow and with this support system, students are given their best environment to be successful in whatever they are doing.

The Family Systems Theory is a theory of “ human behavior” developed by Dr. Murray Bowen almost continually over the span of his lifetime. The theory focuses mostly on

approaches to problem solving that are unique delineate from the accepted line of thinking.

Rather than look at an individual when trying to solve a problem or achieve a certain goal, those who practice the Family Systems Theory, look at possible issues or factors like “marital conflict, addiction, acting-out teenagers, difficult relationships, and loneliness” before and while addressing the situation. In summary, Family Systems Theory “sees individual functioning and human relationships in terms of a multigenerational family system”. Basically, an individual is a product of those who came before them, those who surround them, and those who interact with them in any way throughout the day.

While the Family Systems Theory’s primary purpose is to counsel, in a psychological sense, people in all types of family situations in a way that makes that family system more productive, the theory and its beliefs are not unrelated to schools. Every school is a set of small communities that make up a larger one. The smallest community is a classroom. Next biggest may be a single grade. Followed by a group of grades (middle school, junior high school and high school) and then the school as a whole. Even beyond the school itself is the town or city that the school is located in. In this way, school districts are a complex system that relies on all of its parts to be functioning adequately in order for positive outcomes to be experienced.

ECAs bring this entire system together, and their purpose supports the very basis of Dr. Bowen’s Family Systems Theory. Just as a family depends on a wide variety of activities or unorganized rituals (dinner, church, chores, traveling, celebrations) that all contribute to the overall functionality of all family members, so do schools. In schools, instruction,

counseling, dances and ECAs all include a wide variety of people who are integral to the success of not only students but also the other staff. If a teacher is not putting effort into his or her teaching, causing students to misunderstand information, then the teacher of that same content in the next year has to play “catch up” or teach the information all over again, thus losing time. If a school counselor does not do his or her job to set up a student with a schedule that fits their strengths and needs, teachers, students and parents can feel a strain.

By increasing the community-wide involvement in ECAs, from parents of students, to the school staff, to students themselves, the entire school system is put in a position where they can achieve at a greater level than they did before. This achievement may come in a sense of overall connectedness in the community or it may actually be more observable like higher test scores, better school attendance, and higher graduation rates. ECAs have the ability to involve every small part of the school system, if and only if the effort is put in at every level. Going back to the Family Systems Theory and its connection to school systems, if a parent is not supportive of their child at home, it makes it much harder for that child to excel as a student. Similarly, if a child is disrespectful and insubordinate, a marriage may be strained or a parent’s relationship with their other children may be compromised. Schools should be looked at like a family in that way. Every part depends on another part, no matter how small or large, year after year, to ensure certain goals can be met. ECAs, if worked into a schedule where they can be offered to every student in a school, can increase connectedness between all of these parts and increase the likelihood of achieving the particular goals of that school system.

Proposal

The previous sections outline all of the reasons that an increased involvement in ECAs can be beneficial for the students and the school community as a whole. The vision of making ECAs a requirement, or a part of the curriculum (by making them some type of elective), is one that has not been done at any scale in the United States today. There are examples of vocational schools, where students' career interests are embedded in everything they do and are evaluated on. These programs may take students out of school for half of a day or a part of the day and allow them an environment and the resources necessary to practice a skill that interests them. My proposal and my vision is to bring programs like that into schools. Instead of taking students by bus to a location separate from the school, this school would have the resources available to allow students to pursue their interest at school, with all of their classmates.

As a disclaimer or sorts, the idea of pushing for all students to be involved extracurricularly is not meant to take time away from instruction. It is not meant to peg ECAs as more important and instruction as less important. Rather it is to describe the way that the two should complement each other. Instruction in the core content areas should guide students to pursue interests, while also giving them the chance to refine specific skills that are necessary later in their education, and in their life. There is no question that instruction fills in gaps that ECAs cannot fulfill. Similarly, ECAs can fill in gaps that may be left in instruction like fitness, collaborative communication and teamwork to pursue a common goal. The two components of school enhance how the other is perceived and experienced and they should be used together in schools at the greatest extent possible.

Even though it may seem like an ideal situation to implement a program where ECAs are eventually required of all students, there are two or three big questions that can be raised against the practicality of this kind of program. These questions include: What will be considered an extra-curricular activity? where will the extra time come from to provide ECAs for every student? and where will the money come from to support this kind of requirement? To each of these questions there is an answer and while the answer may not be perfect, neither is not having enough ECAs for students to benefit from.

In determining what will be considered an ECA, schools will have to be clear in how they define ECAs but also can be flexible and accommodating to student interests. For example, if a student takes part in a dance team, 4-H, or something of that sort, that could be considered an ECA for the school. The student may be asked to reflect on the activity just as an assessment to get a determination about how beneficial this activity is to the specific student. While it would not be fair to tell students that they cannot participate in clubs, sports, or activities outside of school, there should be a push to get these students to be a part of an ECA at the school. Again the idea of school connectedness and community would content that the more students who are involved in a common goal or program, the better the opportunity for growth for all students. Another potentially difficult situation could be if students wished to participate in an activity that is not supported by the school, like a gun club. For each school district, decisions will have to be made upon their state laws, and then by their own discretion. Regardless of the decision, the idea beyond requiring ECAs is that all students will be able to be part of a club, activity or team that they have some interest in. While the process of picking and choosing which activities should be offered may be a somewhat laborious process at first, the school would mostly be at their own discretion when making the decisions.

Another big question that may be raised as a potential obstacle for pushing an increased offering of ECAs in schools is when schools will hold activities. Just as there are options for what ECAs to be allowed, there are options for when these activities could be held as well. Some activities like athletics and some clubs ordinarily take place after school, which makes sense given what they are specifically doing: traveling to other schools, practicing outdoors, and meeting or practicing for upwards of two hours a day. However, not every ECA has to be held after school. There are many ways to manipulate a regular block schedule and a regular 9-period day schedule so that an extra chunk of time can be allotted to ECAs without depleting valuable instruction time. With the understanding that every school has unique needs, I will outline three potential models for how a school could manipulate a “typical” block schedule to allow some extra time for ECAs.

Below is a “typical” block schedule for a high school, with an advisement period, (study hall for all students) and a split lunch during 3rd block.

Typical 90-Minute Block Scheduling		
Block 1	Start Time: 7:20	End Time: 8:40
Advisement	8:45	9:20
Block 2	9:25	10:45
Block 3 (Part 1)	10:50	11:30
Lunch	11:30	12:05
Block 3 (Part 2)	12:10	12:45
Block 4	12:50	2:10

With this particular block schedule, there is an advisement period where all students in the school have a chance to do school work and get assistance from specific teachers. In this model, there are usually other times in the day when students have study hall. At the risk of making a generalization, most students do not make the most of their given study hall time in schools. Also, study halls or advisement periods in the beginning of the day often lead to students doing homework that is due later that day or even in the next block. In order to reorganize this block schedule in a way that would provide options for the school, staff and students, I would shift some times along with the placement of ‘Advisement Block’.

Model 1

Proposed Model 1: ECA Block at End of Day		
Block 1	Start Time: 7:20	End Time: 8:40
Block 2	8:45	10:05
Block 3 (Part 1)	10:10	11:00
Lunch	11:05	11:40
Block 3 (Part 2)	11:45	12:10
Block 4	12:15	1:35
ECA/Advisement Block	1:40	2:20

This adjusted schedule simply moves advisement block to the end of the day. This allows for the actual in-class instruction to end at 1:40 P.M. every day with the only other adjustment being the five minutes taken from lunch and then that five minutes being added to Block 3 so that all four blocks have a full 80 minutes. Moving Advisement back to the end of the day eliminates the unproductive, potentially groggy, morning advisement and also adds another

dimension to the possibly of increasing ECA involvement. This block allows students who may be part of a club, team or other activity within the school to be meeting with that activity during the school day. As a result of having this block, meeting consistently would be made much more convenient and therefore there is real avenue for more students to become involved in something that interests them. Given that sport practices do not typically start until 3 or 3:30 P.M., if an athlete wanted to be part of a club or activity that met in the Advisement/ECA block, they could do both with little conflict. One potential problem that could arise from this is the teachers being available to assist students while also possibly being a leader or coach of an ECA. Most likely, if the teacher was a coach or leader of an activity that met every day, they would have to set a specific time aside for students assistance on academic work. At the very least, this model would give schools options and a much greater capacity for the schedule to increase ECA involvement to the point of making it a requirement for all students.

Model 2

Proposed Model 2: ECA Block in Beginning of Day		
ECA Block	Start Time: 7:40	End Time: 8:40
Block 1	8:45	10:05
Block 2 (Part 1)	10:10	11:00
Lunch	11:05	11:40
Block 2 (Part 2)	11:40	12:10
Block 3	12:15	1:35
Block 4	1:40	3:00

This model basically just switches the ECA block to the beginning of the day. Some school may prefer this model for a few reasons. First, it gives students an extra 20 minutes in the morning to do whatever they pleased with. They could sleep in, or simply take more time to get ready, have a good breakfast, etc. Next, it allows students to begin their day with something that they are interested in. This may very well serve as a motivation for students to come to school in the first place. Lastly, this model schedule gives students a later start into their actual course work, which is beneficial for adolescents. In an article from July 2010, American School and University Magazine cited a study done in Rhode Island. This study found that “a delay in school start time . . . was associated with significant improvements in adolescents alertness, mood, and health” (ASUMAG, 2010). Since with this model, students would not actually begin their academic classes until 8:45, students would be given a delay in both the time they have to show up for school as well as a delay in the time they begin working on core content areas.

One of the possible setbacks of this schedule is that the school day would end a little later. However, one positive side of this is that this would leave little downtime between the ending of the day and the start of sport or academic team practices. Since athletes and after-school club members are usually herded into one spot where they can all be monitored after school, this model would give them somewhere to be. Another potential problem that should not go unmentioned is that all of the grades’ start times would most likely be affected by this change. Depending on the resources that each individual school has available this could be an issue that needs resolving. These are just a couple of considerations that must be made, but in return for changing the schedule in a way similar to this model, a school administration would have the ability to provide students a time when they can become more involved in ECAs.

Model 3

Proposed Model 3: ECA Block in Middle of the Day		
Block 1	Start Time: 7:20	End Time: 8:40
Block 2	8:45	10:05
ECA Block	10:10	11:10
Lunch	11:10	11:40
Block 3	11:40	1:00
Block 4	1:05	2:25
Advisement	2:25	3:00

This last possible model moves the ECA block into the middle of the day. This would split up the predictability of moving from classroom to classroom, desk to desk, with little variety. Block 1 and 2 are standard starting times, with the proposed ECA Block coming after Block 2. This placement also makes sense for school districts that think students would lose focus in the rest of the day by either starting or ending the day with ECAs. By having lunch directly follow the ECA Block, students will not moving directly from the ECA Block to their next class. This possibly avoids some undesirable distractions in a content class.

These three models that I just presented look strictly at a block schedule, which many schools use today. All of them are able to manipulated. Maybe some schools would devote more or less time to a proposed ECA Block. Some schools may have it every other day, or three days every week. These details would all depend on the individual school's specific goals and the district's priorities. For a nine-period school day, the setup can be similar. If the school thinks that they should fit in an ECA Period every day, that can be done without significantly changing the amount of time devoted to the other periods. Similarly, a school could decide that an ECA

period every other day would be more effective. The factor of when ECAs can be expanded in schools is not an uncomplicated one, but through the several models and considerations I have compiled here, it is clear that the problem of time is one that can be figured out in a way that is not compromising direct classroom instruction of content.

The most complicated part of this proposal, as with many things in the country today, is money. ECAs cost money and depending on what activities they are, they can cost a lot of money. Schools budget for ECAs every year and devote significant amounts of money to keep them around. Recently, school budget cuts have gone straight for ECAs first, as they are, for good reason, reluctant to cut any thing that has to do with academics. In 2009, a writer for the *New York Times*, Linda Saslow wrote an article highlighting one of the possibilities for schools that are facing budget cuts or for schools that are looking to add ECAs, but do not have sufficient funds. The article, titled “From Educators, Caution on Parent Fund-Raisers and Foundations,” cites several Long Island high schools that faced losing all of their ECAs. The town of Wantagh rose “\$650,000 to restore sports and extracurricular activities cut for budget reasons” (Saslow 1). Parents of students reported that they organized all of the fundraising and that it was very tough work to raise all of the money. Ideally, a school would lead the fundraising efforts in order to expand ECAs, but even if this case it may not be possible to sustain an extensive extracurricular program with just fundraising efforts. In reality, there needs to be bigger involvement from the state and federal government in assisting schools that wish to not only sustain, but expand ECAs in order to require them of all of their students. Given the various ways that ECAs can benefit a student, and a school environment in general, the availability of funds for making a proposal like this possible is very important.

Clearly this type of proposal is not something that can be implemented overnight, much less in a year or two, but the lack of models is something that is holding the whole country back. While not a great number of schools have looked into expanding ECAs and ECA involvement to the point of them being a requirement, there are examples of some. One of the best examples of a school taking a leap and implementing this sort of plan can be found in New York City. The TEP (The Equity Program) Charter School located in Washington Heights, New York City and is a fifth through eighth grade middle school with about 480 students. The school is based off extensive research on “teacher quality” and “student achievement”. One of the several distinguishing features of TEP is the “Extended-Day Activities”. These activities are ECAs that are manned entirely and completely by school staff. The school website describes, “each teacher designs and leads one extra-curricular activity”. Three days a week, the school day is extended 55 minutes. From 3:05 P.M. to 4:00 P.M., students stay at school and participate in an ECA that is decided upon after “each student ranks his or her preferences” and they are placed in that activity for a quarter of the school year. Once that particular quarter is over with, the students will go through the same process and choose another teacher-led activity to participate in. For their added responsibility to lead students not only in the classroom but also outside of the classroom the teachers at TEP Charter School get a base salary of \$125,000, clearly a price that values the teacher’s contributions. TEP Charter School is a perfect example of what an extracurricular requirement could look like. Students are given choice, but all of them are still part of an activity. The school writes “the key to TEP’s instructional program is that TEP students spend extended time with master teachers” (TEP Charter School, 2013). As previously

discussed, students benefit in many ways from having the ability to explore their interests in the form of an ECA. They also benefit from instruction in the classroom. In TEP, and possibly in many other United States' schools, these benefits can be taken advantage of simultaneously, leading to a benefit to not only the students, but also the entire school community.

Conclusion

While there are real questions that arise when looking into implementing a school program that requires expansion and retention of ECAs, ECA importance is not something that can be adequately measured by dollars or hours. Student participation in ECAs is shown to improve academic achievement, positively influence social growth, and open up options for students after high school. However, the impact of an ECA requirement does not stop there. School-wide participation in such a program would also require increased teacher participation in these activities as well as more active parent involvement. By making ECAs a requirement in schools, there would also be an unspoken requirement to develop a community that works together to give others opportunities to learn, grow, and achieve in the way that students are most comfortable and most interested. Requiring ECAs would undoubtedly benefit the student and the student's future, but it would also have the capabilities to benefit the totality of the school community.

Amidst the introduction of the first Common Core State Tests, it has become clear to educators everywhere that with great change can come a great challenge. In my opinion, the only way to create a school system that requires students to participate in ECAs is to do it step by step. It should not be question in what direction the school is headed and what the ultimate goal is, but by starting from the ground up, schools and their administrators will be more readily equipped to grow, as they feel comfortable. Instead of requiring ECAs in the first years, schools

can simply look to increase student, staff and parent involvement in ECA participation. In the pilot years of the program, participation could be incentive based. Students and staff could reap instant benefits or rewards for ECA participation. Schools like Woodstock and TEP Charter School do not have to be aberrations in the United States; they can gradually become the norm. All students can be put in the most ideal environment to pursue what interests them without compromising their learning in content area classes. Teachers can come to school everyday with more motivation to inspire and parents can actively become a part of their child's life in a new, meaningful way. Eventually, a community, a county, a state, and maybe even a country could be actively involved in working toward a common goal every day. Today's students are tomorrow's teachers, doctors, lawyers, conservationists and parents. By moving toward an ECA requirement in United States' schools, these schools will give students the skills and competencies necessary to become a successful member of society, a successful product of a common goal.

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