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Why boys need extracurricular activities

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Failing Boys

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Catherine Hatton, a Sturgeon Falls, Ont., high school teacher, has taught drama for years and she knows the gender splits can be formidable. In a class of 27 this year, she's got just six boys.

But when she gets around to doing the casting call for the annual school play, Ms. Hatton has no intention of mounting a production of *Seven Brides for Two Brothers*. Rather, she'll go out and lean on the boys to audition, targeting both the jocks (whose participation helps make drama acceptable for other boys) as well as kids who may be shy, un-athletic or simply in need of "a bit of a push."

Does that teacherly tap on the shoulder make a difference in participation rates? "Oh, absolutely," she replies. "I had one boy who was hesitant all through, and this year he's directing his own play."

Nipissing University professor of education Douglas Gosse, himself a long-time English teacher, observes that such school-based extracurricular activities confer all sorts of long-term benefits on kids, including public recognition, leadership, communications and problem-solving skills, and even clues about where a student's future career interests may lie.

In fact, student achievement and participation in such programs "are very linked," he observes. "We need to provide boys with ways of engaging in more extracurricular activities as a normal part of their school experience and social development. The costs and logistics of doing this far outweigh the costs of many boys continuing to feel disengaged, dropping out of school, and choosing not pursue post-secondary education."

But there's plenty of evidence, anecdotal and statistical, to suggest that many boys aren't getting involved after the bell rings.

At the elementary level, activities like talent shows and music programs can be heavily skewed in term of boy-girl participation. And a casual scan of school yearbooks will reveal that outside of sports, the membership of many clubs, student associations and extracurricular arts activities tend to have more girls than boys.

Indeed, a 2004 study for the U.S. National Centre for Educational Statistics found that girls were much more likely than boys to be involved in every category of extracurricular activity except sports teams. Those gender skews, the study found, haven't shifted much since the early 1990s.

The reasons, as with so much of education, are complex. Access, for instance, can be a significant impediment, Prof. Gosse notes. For some low-income or single-parent families, school clubs and other after-school programs are not an option because of fees, pick-up times and other obstacles.

But prevailing attitudes - among boys, faculty and within the school generally, can be an equally significant barrier. "You can offer a whole range of extracurricular activities but will boys participate if they don't fit into the dominant culture?" says University of Western Ontario professor of education Wayne Martino. "School culture plays a big part in this."

Indeed, rote promotional activities, like the annual club sign-up fair or announcements on the PA system, may not be sufficient, according to some educators, who believe it's crucial for schools to do more to reach out to disengaged boys directly and, in effect, market these programs more aggressively, both to students and their parents or caregivers.

Of course, much depends on the willingness of individual teachers to put in the extra time, and recognize that there's a fairly clear connection between how kids do in class and their participation in after-school activities.

"First and foremost, the teacher needs to go out and get them," says Ms. Hatton. "It has to be an effort on the teacher's part to find the kids and work around their schedules."

Other educators agree. "You do it because you know there's a need for it," adds Toronto Grade 7 teacher Lukrica Prugo, who coaches three teams, including ultimate Frisbee, and tries to serve as a role model not just for the students but also her colleagues. "I think the kids are always watching me."

Some schools are increasingly looking to develop programs that straddle in-class and after-school time. At Toronto's Thorncliffe Park Public School, for example, principal Kevin Battaglia brings in entrepreneurs to do mentoring sessions with a Grade 8 all-boys class. But he selects individuals who are prepared to take that kind of interaction to the next level. "I'm not a huge fan of just having guest speakers," says Mr. Battaglia, who also feels that too many educators rely on sports as the way to connect with disengaged boys.

At a former school, for example, he invited a graffiti artists who'd become a professional graphic designer to come in and talk about his trade, but then also conduct a series of workshops - some held after school or during lunch periods - for the kids to help them design T-shirt logos and comic book graphics. With these kinds of activities, Mr. Battaglia says, the line between class and extracurricular activity "begins to blur."

Where is it written that extracurricular activities have to take place after school?

Most high schools reflexively schedule clubs and sports at the end of the day, and thus run the risk of losing students who bolt when the bell rings. But at Greenwood College School, a private co-ed academy in midtown Toronto, such activities are folded right into the school day - a 30-minute morning period three days a week. "What you're doing is normalizing it," says principal Allan Hardy. "It's a way to support extracurricular activities but not place them at the end of the day."

Administrators at Greenwood, which has 415 students in grades 7 to 12, take the view that extracurricular activities boost "affiliation" between the school and its students - a connection, Mr. Hardy notes, that doesn't always come easily to male students. The student council leaders, he says, are closely consulted for ideas on the sorts of activities that appeal to their classmates. "There's a sense of ownership."

Greenwood also boosts engagement by organizing community service programs and scheduling these on Wednesday mornings, a day when school begins an hour later. The activities include coaching in schools serving low-income communities or volunteering in local seniors' homes. While most high schools expect students to find their own community service opportunities, Mr. Hardy says Greenwood prefers to control the process because many teens aren't especially good at finding volunteer gigs that provide meaningful experiences.

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