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# No Level Playing Field in After-School Activities



By Kaisa Snellman , INSEAD Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Jennifer M. Silva, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Bucknell University

## **Working-class students are disappearing from extracurricular activities, an alarming sign of declining social mobility.**

Strongly correlated with improved outcomes in later life, extracurricular activities are not mere nice-to-have add-ons to the secondary education experience. But in the United States, after-school activities are on track to becoming luxuries reserved for children from middle- and upper-class families.

In a recent [study](#) co-authored with Carl B. Frederick and Robert D. Putnam, we examined trends in extracurricular participation among American high school since the 1970s. Our findings are troubling. In very nearly all types of academic clubs and sports teams that we examined, we found the same trend: while upper-middle-class students have become more involved in school clubs and sports teams, working-class students have become increasingly disengaged and disconnected.

It's yet another piece of dismaying news suggesting that the American public education system, rather than serving its intended function as an engine of social mobility, is succumbing to worsening wealth and class polarisation in the society. French economist Thomas Piketty wrote that the level of inequality in today's United States exceeds that of pre-World War I Europe. With the rift deepening everywhere, little attention has been given to how extracurricular activities are affected. But skipping over this issue may leave the U.S. poorer, in more ways than one.

## **The Value of Organised Activities**

There are good reasons why admissions departments at elite U.S. universities use extracurricular participation as a criterion in evaluating applicants. Engagement in organised activities, particularly in a leadership role, prepares students for the real world in ways their coursework can't. Student athletes learn the importance of perseverance and teamwork; similarly, participation in academic clubs hones "soft" skills that are critical for workplace success. **One study found** that participation in extracurriculars has income benefits comparable to more than half a year of additional education.

There is also strong evidence that extracurriculars can help disadvantaged students get ahead by enabling them to build social relationships across class lines. From their upper-middle-class teammates and club-mates, working-class students may soak up knowledge about applying, enrolling and paying for college. This egalitarian aspect may be part of the reason involvement in extracurriculars is associated with political and civic engagement in later life.

The skills and social networks built through taking part in extracurriculars have also been shown to promote well-being, healthy choices, and pro-social behaviour.

## **Class Polarisation**

The growing engagement gap reflects the increasingly stark polarisation between low-income and wealthy communities. As reported by a recent **study** by sociologists Sean Reardon and Kendra Bischoff, American neighbourhoods have become increasingly segregated by income. As middle-income neighbourhoods disappear and affluent and low-income communities drift further apart, the distribution of public resources—schools

in particular— has become more and more uneven. Poorer communities often lack the resources to maintain the facilities required for certain extracurricular activities. Swim teams need pools, theatre clubs need community halls, and Little League baseball teams need fields to play on. Many cash-strapped schools have jettisoned team sports altogether. High schools with wealthy students now offer twice the number of team sports as schools serving mainly low-income students.

Public schools across the country have responded to state budget cuts by imposing “pay to play” fees on school clubs and athletic teams. Sports have been especially hard hit, with fees averaging, at a conservative estimate, US\$600 per activity. *The Wall Street Journal* wrote of a [school in Ohio](#) whose track team shrank by more than half after fees were introduced. Nationwide, one in three student athletes from homes making US\$60,000 or less annually dropped out of sports to avoid the fees. For families with annual income exceeding that amount, one in ten gave increasing fees as the reason for quitting a team.

Schools in wealthy districts are also feeling the shrinking of the budget, but in many cases programs have been saved - or even expanded - with the help of private donations from parents and local community associations. It is not uncommon for parent-teacher associations to raise money. But the amounts they typically raise vary tremendously, from very modest amounts to several thousand dollars per pupil. As Stanford political scientist Robert Reich points out in [The New York Times](#), private donations to public schools widens the gap between rich and poor. And since such donations are treated as charitable donations that lessen the tax burden and thereby decrease the tax revenues that would have been otherwise distributed to schools across the board, private giving is essentially a federally subsidised activity.

## **The Key to Mobility**

With schools struggling to find money to pay teachers and buy books, funding swim teams and chess clubs may seem like a frivolous activity.

Shouldn't poor schools worry more about test scores and reading levels?

The answer is no. There is overwhelming evidence that working-class kids, because of the additional challenges they face in the educational system and in later life, need extracurriculars even more than elite students with Ivy League aspirations. The social connections and character traits gleaned from

extracurricular participation may offer the key to upward mobility and a secure middle-class life.

Furthermore, allowing extracurriculars to become established as something only for rich kids sets an unfortunate precedent for adulthood. In a democracy, civic and communal life should be open to representation from all classes. Living up to the American creed of equal opportunity requires closing the engagement gap as swiftly as possible.



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