

Mandate extracurricular activities for Colorado students

By Brian Kurz Colorado Voices The Denver Post

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There are few experiences more gratifying to a teacher than witnessing a student's success in extracurricular activities. From bringing a character to life in a school play to observing a physics club experiment that shows off a student's potential, out-of-class activities help students see the world through a wider lens than in-class activities provide.

This semester, yearbook coordinators in high schools across the state are handing out activity forms to seniors. The forms are innocuous; they list every group, club, and sports team the school offers followed by grade levels. The students circle which activity they participated in and year they did so. As a teacher of seniors, this can be the most saddening few minutes of the year. Too many students have gone through their entire high school careers and not taken advantage of these opportunities. They turn their sheets back in blank.

There may be reasons why a student has not participated in any of the dozens and dozens of activities provided. Students could be tasked with taking on a job to help support his or her family, or they may be responsible for the after-school care of younger siblings. It may be a breakdown in communication between the activity sponsors, students, or family. Myriad reasons may lead to this reality. However, this situation should be unacceptable.

High school needs to be a time of exploration. Be it seeing the real-world applications of what is learned in Key Club or through witnessing the work ethic of students in Speech and Debate, extracurricular programs provide an abundance of opportunities for all students. In addition, student's can gain a healthy contrast to their peer group, exposing them to different values and perspectives.

Students should have a choice of what they participate in. However, they should not have the choice to not participate at all.

Graduation requirements need to include involvement in at least one out-of-class activity per year.

Schools across Colorado are currently changing their curriculum to adjust to the Common Core, a set of national standards for all schools. The mission statement of the Common Core says it aims to allow our "communities to be best positioned to compete in the global economy." These new standards, despite several hearings in the state legislature calling for their delay, will likely be in full force next year.

As a teacher, I seldom take a macro "global economy" view into consideration when designing lesson plans. Instead, I believe, the best lessons not only teach the value of the topic but also make them relevant to the student's lives. Extracurricular activities, by their nature, make what is learned in school more applicable to the student's lives. Students need to see that learning is not just a classroom expectation.

The Common Core asks educators to reconsider and re-evaluate what is taught in the classroom. Despite its opposition, this should be a healthy activity for all schools. By reconsidering what is expected of students outside of the classroom, the entire high school experience can be enhanced.

By mandating one extracurricular activity per student, per year students would gain experience; they could decide what interests them through involvement and reflection. Far too often students allow school to happen, with this requirement they are forced to become active participants.

Instead of being limited to school-based activities, all options could be pursued. Mechanically inclined students could count an internship at an auto shop. Denver's English Speaking Union provides essay-writing contests and a Shakespearian acting competition, a great fit for students of the arts. The Denver Natural History Museum provides volunteer opportunities, allowing science-minded students to gain valuable experience. If a student believes that his current job is preparing him for life outside of school, he need only explain why to receive credit.

Requiring students to take advantage of the opportunities that a high school education offers does not ask them to do much more work. Instead, the students would be asked to make their work more valuable.

We cannot allow our students to simply attend high school; they need to participate in high school.

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