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Ensuring the educational achievement of children in America is both a core value of the American people and a vital goal of the United States federal and state governments. The United States spent over 600 billion dollars in 2013-14 (in 2016 dollars) on public education, which amounts to roughly 12,500 dollars per pupil in the public education system in kindergarten through twelfth grade.^u Of its many goals, America's public education system aims to educate its future leaders and citizens. Policymakers throughout the nation are constantly striving to implement new strategies that maximize these educational outcomes. While the focus has primarily been on educational achievement and classroom learning, extracurricular activities (EAs) have also been championed as a complementary strategy that aids in the improvement of behavioral and cognitive learning, teaching valuable life and learning skills that translate to better success both inside and outside of the classroom. Although EAs have resulted in some improvements, the participation rate of low-income students dramatically lags behind than that of their more privileged peers. To help ensure that the amount the United States spends on K-12 public education achieves optimal results for everyone, the Department of Education should consider the use of alternative methods to encourage participation in extracurricular activities across all levels of socioeconomic status.

Examining the Benefits of Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular activities (EAs) can be defined as any organized activity led by an adult that takes place outside of the normal classroom setting during the school day. EAs include a diverse array of activities including sports, music, or membership in science and math clubs. Participation in these activities has a wide range of observable effects and outcomes on children's academic and socio-behavioral skills. Involvement in these activities could have dramatic impacts on the future success of individuals and allow children and adolescents to develop an identity, interact with peers, and experience following orders from an adult role model. Examples of socio-behavioral skills developed through EA participation include non-cognitive skills - e.g., attentiveness, task persistence, independence, and eagerness to learn - and social skills - peer-to-peer interaction, respect for authority, and teamwork. An extensive body of research claims the gains of EAs are found in these socio-behavioral skills,

which then translate into improvements in academic skills.

The benefits of EA participation are especially large for low-income students. In 2010, Covay and Carbonaro conducted a study on educational outcomes for students in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, focused on the role of EAs on the development of non-cognitive skills. Their study found that participation in these activities was related to better non-cognitive skills “that include (but are not limited to) working well within groups, dealing with authority figures, and fitting in with peers.”^[2] The authors theorize that EA participation leads to better non-cognitive skills which in turn leads to better cognitive outcomes. For all students studied, they found all types of extracurricular activities (sports, clubs, dance, music, art, and performing arts) significantly improved reading test scores for the third graders included in the study. Sports, clubs, and music also improved math scores for the same third-grade cohort.^[3] Covay and Carbonaro’s findings are corroborated by a 2006 study from Susan Dumais of Louisiana State University, which found that the number of activities in which a student participated was correlated with both higher reading and math scores, including higher ratings from teachers.^[4]

In a review of studies, Feldman and Matjasko (2005) concluded that EA involvement benefits the personal growth of adolescents and teaches them skills applicable inside and outside of the classroom by providing them an avenue for identity exploration and the opportunity to develop a social support network. These studies also find that no one kind of extracurricular activity is better at improving student skills.^[5] Covay and Carbonaro touted the value of sports (among many others), claiming it allows low-SES students to “learn and practice noncognitive skills that facilitate learning within the classroom.”^[6] Dumais emphasized dance and art lessons as having the most significant impact on academic outcomes. A 2003 study by Fletcher et al. concluded club activity participation resulted in higher grades and improved competence ratings from teachers.^[7] The variation in benefits could be explained by the variability in local situations, where different extracurriculars yield better results depending on where they are implemented. This implies local control over EAs is still ideal.

Examining the Disparities in Extracurricular Activities

According to the Pew Research Center, participation of low-income students in extracurricular activities is limited. Divided into three income brackets – families that make less than 30,000 dollars, between 30,000 and 75,000 dollars, and more than 75,000 dollars yearly – researchers found that children from families in the lowest income bracket were roughly 10 to 20 percent less likely to participate in a given extracurricular activity. Wealthy

students played sports at an 84 percent participation rate compared to a 59 percent rate for students from the lowest bracket. Similarly, the gap for music and dance lessons was 21 percent.^[11] Looking at why low-income students miss opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, Dearing et al. found that as income falls by 10,000 dollars, the odds of participating in one or more activity drops by a factor of 1.11. Moreover, the effect of income on EA participation grew as income dropped, meaning the participation gap was widest at the lowest end of the income distribution.^[12]

The low participation rate of students from families with lower incomes is largely attributable to the lack of resources accessible by their parents. Some researchers, most notably Annette Lareau, claim the existence of a “cultural logic of child rearing” for middle- and upper-class families.^[13] However, other evidence from Chin and Phillips questions the logic of Lareau’s findings, convincingly positing that a lack of resources is the primary driver of this culture exhibited by parents with higher incomes. Examining summer activities, the authors attribute the broad variation in summer activities – from vacationing in Italy and fifty dollar biweekly music lessons to spending every day watching television with cousins – to the lack of resources low-income parents possessed to provide the summer experience they desired for their children. Three key missing resources were money, parental knowledge, and parental time. The limitations of money are the most obvious: families cannot afford the camps, vacations, or other activities of their wealthier peers. Part of this problem is parents were unaware of available and affordable programs and the level and type of attention that would benefit their children most. Even when parents found these opportunities, they did not have the time to take off work for a vacation or struggled to get their child to and from camp. Wealthy families that have more time and resources face comparatively fewer barriers in these areas. Most importantly, throughout their research, Chin & Phillips found the same level of desire irrespective of family income, with many parents lamenting their inability to afford the ideal experience for their children.^[14]

Concerns about lower level EA take-up among low-income students are exacerbated by how these activities benefit low-income students more than their more privileged peers. Studies have found that students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds benefited more from participation in EAs than their wealthier peers. These proportionally higher benefits were attributed to the lack of similar opportunities at home for the poorer students. Dumais reached this conclusion in her 2006 study, finding that “participating in activities is related to increased gains in reading achievement test scores, with the gains being larger for students from lower SES backgrounds than from higher SES backgrounds.”^[15] Clearly, participation in extracurricular activities is concentrated away from the students who would benefit most from them.

Evidence-based policy can address these disparities. In 2013, Sylvia Epps, Aletha Huston, and Kaeley Bobbitt published a study on the impact New Hope, an employment-based poverty intervention, had on participation in extracurricular activities. New Hope provided earnings supplements, child care subsidies, and health care subsidies to low-income, full-time working adults. Random selection of benefit recipients allowed for an experimental evaluation of the program's success. While the benefits of the program were directed at adults, the program's elements had a direct impact on the lives of the recipients' children. The additional money provided by New Hope removed barriers to entry for some extracurricular activities and increased participation. For example, parents could now afford to buy soccer uniforms for children. The New Hope program also improved the children's school achievement and personal growth.^[13] These results indicate that policy interventions can address socioeconomic disparities in EA participation, improving the US education system overall. Although EAs are not a silver bullet to solve the inequality in education, extracurricular activity participation is proven to improve academic outcomes for all students, especially for low-income students.

Policy Goals

Any policy dedicated to improving educational outcomes via extracurricular activities (EAs) should address three main goals. First, the policy should improve the academic achievement of students by increasing low-income EA participation rates and promoting the most successful activities for that age group. Second, any policy should work to minimize costs per student targeted for both administrative and subsidy costs. Finally, the policy ought to target low-income students as much as possible.

The main priority of any education policy is to improve the academic achievement of the students. Ensuring equal educational opportunities for everyone regardless of their socioeconomic background is central to the US public education system. Yet, numerous studies convey that this is not a reality.^[14] As EAs have been shown to improve the educational outcomes of all students, especially those of lower socioeconomic status, an increase in the participation rate of students in the US public school system would improve their academic achievement. Therefore, low-SES student participation rates in extracurricular activities will serve as a proxy for the academic benefits accrued from participation. Although EA participation also improves other socio-behavioral skills, this policy analysis will be limited to academic metrics because these skills are difficult to measure, especially across studies with varying definitions, and they have been proven to translate into academic outcomes.^[15]

It is worth noting that, while studies have found that participation in extracurricular activities in general improves academic outcomes, each study identified certain EAs that are more effective than others, sometimes contradicting each other. Therefore, increasing participation in specific EAs on a school-to-school basis is another piece to consider when striving for educational attainment.

There are two main parts to government spending dedicated to extracurricular activity participation promotion: administrative costs and subsidy costs. Administrative costs encapsulate all of the costs related to oversight and implementation. These costs include selecting participants, reviewing applications, employing relevant personnel, confirming compliance with program requirements, and any money transfer costs. These costs could fluctuate based on the difficulty of identifying recipients and monitoring compliance. Subsidy costs are the amount of money actually offered to the recipients of the program, whether it be the school or the family.

The effectiveness of the policy and the program it creates will be determined by its ability to target and positively impact the desired population. In this instance, this policy ought to prioritize low-income students for the receipt of extra funds and attention, and each alternative will be evaluated on the proportion of benefits accrued to these students.

Policy Alternatives

Status Quo: Despite a wealth of research illustrating the benefits of extracurricular activities for academic and socio-behavioral development, there is no consistent policy at the state or national level dedicated to promoting participation in them. Some policies exist at local levels that encourage participation in a variety of pre- and post-school extracurricular activities, but these often exist on a sub-city level, often implemented by community development organizations. One famous example is the Harlem Community Zone (HCZ) in New York City. As a holistic program dedicated to improving all aspects of life for impoverished families, the HCZ provided a wealth of programming, including extensive activities offered before and after school. The schools in the HCZ, called the Promise Academy, were successful at eliminating the black-white achievement gap for middle schoolers in math and for elementary school students in both math and reading. Despite its success, the HCZ was an expensive and comprehensive program, rarely duplicated throughout the rest of the United States.¹⁶¹

Conditional Cash Transfers: Conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs have been implemented around the world as a means to incentivize parents in developing and middle-income countries to invest in the “human capital” development of their children. Starting in

Mexico and Brazil around 1997, CCTs have spread to over sixty countries, with many countries running more than one CCT at once.^[17] Generally speaking, CCTs are aimed at alleviating poverty while encouraging the future success of the children of targeted families. While some variation exists between countries, these programs usually offer varying levels of rewards for students reaching certain school and preventative health objectives. Domestically, a CCT program called Opportunity NYC-Family Rewards was implemented in New York City's six highest poverty communities. The program offered cash rewards for twelve different activities, ranging from 20 dollars per month for parents maintaining health care for themselves to 600 dollars for a high school student passing the New York State Regents subject area test.^[18] While most CCTs worldwide offer a portfolio of rewards for "human capital" investment, this program will be highly focused and only reward participation in an extracurricular activity.

Additional Extracurricular Funding. Another angle to address barriers to entry for low-income students in extracurricular activities is the costs of participation. Schools across the country often provide scholarships to help mitigate these costs. However, these scholarships are often insufficient, as evidenced by the research by Chin and Phillips.^[19] Looking at parents who searched for the best possible discount available to enroll their children in activities, they found that many low-income parents were still unable to afford the program. This issue could be addressed by providing additional funding to schools in poorer communities to lessen the cost of providing extracurricular activities. This alternative directs money towards the schools rather than individuals, expanding the number of extracurricular activities and making them more accessible. The additional funds will only be offered to schools where 40 percent of the students qualify for free school lunch, a benchmark established by the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act.^[20] Based on this metric, approximately 30,000 schools in the United States would be eligible.^[21]

Assessing Policy Alternatives

GOAL	IMPACT CATEGORY	STATUS QUO	CONDITIONAL CASH TRANSFER	SCHOOL FUNDING
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT	Extracurricular Activity Enrollment	Medium-Low – participation rates low in a majority of EAs	High – Eliminate all barriers to entry	Medium – Eliminate cost barrier to entry
	Enroll in Best Extracurricular Activity	Low – Cost, time, and knowledge all limit choice	High – Full information and tiered incentives	Medium-Low – Time and knowledge barriers
COST EFFICIENCY	Administrative Cost	Low – None	High – 11.3 cents per every dollar transferred	Medium – Identify and audit fewer recipients
	Subsidy Cost	Low – None	High – Providing money to all eligible low-income students	Medium – Serving massive low-income population, but economy of scale
TARGETING	Targeting	Low – High-income students most likely to participate in EAs	High – Money directed at neediest students	Medium-Low – Target schools, cannot target students

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Figure 1: Policy Matrix for Three Policy Alternatives

Status Quo: The status quo is the least likely to maximize educational attainment of any of the policies considered in this analysis. The current low participation rate for low-income students means there is ample opportunity missed for these students to see improvements to their educational attainment through extracurriculars. Although the status quo performs worst at promoting educational attainment, it is necessarily the most cost-efficient since it does not require additional funding. Although extracurricular participation is desirable, no negative monetary consequences would accumulate from neglecting to invest additional funds. Finally, the current status quo does a poor job of targeting any benefits for low-income students as evidenced by their lower participation rate and survey evidence from Chin and Phillips. Since the funding structure will not change, this policy has low targeting.

Conditional Cash Transfers: Where implemented, conditional cash transfers are nearly universally successful at improving school enrollment and attendance metrics. A meta-analysis of CCTs worldwide found they improved primary school enrollment by 3.4 percent and attendance by 3 percent.^[22] (García and Saavedra). Even more dramatically, secondary school enrollment improved by 7.1 percent and attendance by 5.75. Applying the same success to the American context, a CCT could achieve similar results in EA participation. The additional money from the cash transfer could also reduce other barriers such as club fees, cost of lessons, or price of sports jerseys. CCTs also address another cause of lower EA participation: asymmetric information.^[23] CCT payments add an infrastructure for distributing

information about available and low-cost activities.

A conditional cash transfer program would be the most expensive of the policy alternatives. Using qualification for the National School Lunch Program as the benchmark, 31 million students in the United States are considered low-income^[24]. Even a small transfer of 30 dollars per student per school year could reach nearly 8.4 billion dollars in annual transfer costs alone. There are also administrative costs. For an average CCT, every 100 dollars spent is accompanied by 11.3 dollars in administrative costs.^[25] Applying that ratio to this policy, a subsidy of 30 dollars would result in approximately 34 dollars of total costs per student, raising total costs to 9.5 billion dollars annually. If subsidies were to expand to 50 dollars per student (or higher), which could be necessary before real results are seen, costs would skyrocket to 15.8 billion dollars, especially if take-up rates reflect those of other CCTs at 97 percent.^[26] Nevertheless, this is a generously high estimate in terms of eligibility. If eligibility is limited to only children below the poverty line, that number, and cost, is cut in half to roughly 16 million. Additional targeting could include schools/communities where EA participation is particularly low or could sort by type of settlement (urban, suburban, etc.).

Finally, a CCT is the best policy alternative at targeting the desired population of students. The CCT could be targeted to low-income students by offering eligibility alongside the National School Lunch Program. Therefore, only targeted students would receive the benefit conditional on their participation in an extracurricular activity.

Additional Extracurricular Funding: Findings from the New Hope program and Chin and Phillips conclude that the cost of EAs is one of many barriers to participation. Chin and Philips identified several parents who sought out enrichment programs but could not enroll their children due to high costs. Similarly, the New Hope research concluded that the childcare subsidies contributed to parents investing more time into their children’s EAs. Nevertheless, other barriers to participation in EAs, such as parental time and knowledge, limit the effectiveness of this alternative. Moreover, providing schools additional funding to make EAs cheaper does not necessarily translate into the money being dedicated to the activities best suited to improve academic outcomes for students. Even if the money were to come with a condition for it to be spent on a particular activity, schools could simply repurpose the money originally dedicated to that activity.

Although the policy is a simple cash transfer program to schools, some administrative costs exist in identifying the schools where the money would be most effective. Also, there would be costs associated with ensuring the money appropriated is being directed towards reducing the costs of EAs, most likely through scholarships. In contrast to CCTs, this is where the administrative costs end. This policy would only need to identify target schools,

substantially reducing the number of entities needing evaluation. Subsidy costs would be higher for this policy than the status quo; nevertheless, they will be lower than those for CCTs. This alternative benefits from economies of scale where the more subsidies a school receives, the more the school can identify the most efficient way to distribute the cost savings.

While the money allocated would be directed at low-income schools using CEP lunch program eligibility, this metric only identifies schools where 40 percent of the students are low-income, meaning up to 60 percent of participating schools could be composed of students outside of the desired population. Even in a theoretical school with 100 percent low-income students, subsidy money could be spent in ways other than increasing EA access. For example, instead of hiring a new soccer coach to open a new team, the money could be spent to send the basketball team to Florida for a tournament. It would be challenging to monitor each school to ensure funds are used properly.

Recommendations and Plans for Implementation

Based on the above analysis, the Department of Education should consider pursuing both conditional cash transfers and the provision of additional funding to schools to improve EA participation rates among students from low-income households. García and Saavedra’s meta-analysis of CCTs finds that the most effective programs, in both absolute and per-dollar terms, are the ones that combine “cash transfers to families with supply-side interventions such as school grants or cash transfers to teachers or parent-teacher associations.”¹²²¹ Although CCTs are expensive programs to implement, especially on a national level, the 9.5 billion dollars CCTs would cost annually is only a small fraction of the 600 billion dollars the U.S spends on education overall. While further research on CCT programs is needed to better guide the policy process better, the societal benefits associated with such a program appear promising. By coupling the CCT with investment in EAs at local schools, the program is likely to be even more successful with minimal extra cost.

The current education system has failed to promote participation in extracurricular activities and ignored their potential benefits for low-income students. A holistic approach of conditional cash transfers and school funding to promote greater extracurricular participation would likely improve academic outcomes for low-income students across the United States. The implementation of this program can be completed through already established structures in the National School Lunch program and the Community Eligibility Provision. Using these two eligibility standards as the eligibility for a CCT program and extracurricular funding respectively, this program could be implemented within a

preexisting structure already housed in each state's education agency. Although state participation would be required for the program, a federal block grant could cover the majority, if not all, of the costs to ensure state participation in the policies. All in, a structure already exists to implement the CCT program and accompanying additional funding for low-income schools. Utilizing this structure, a CCT program with additional school funding to encourage extracurricular activity participation could have a dramatic impact on maximizing educational outcomes for children.

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