

The far-reaching costs of losing extracurricular activities during COVID-19

COVID-19 has forced Ontario public educators and school staff, parents, and students to change and adapt more rapidly than ever before. In this report, we examine the impacts on extracurricular activities, fundraising, and the students they are meant to support, based on the People for Education 2020/21 Annual School Survey.

As schools adjusted to virtual, hybrid or in-class attendance, extracurricular activities, not surprisingly, plummeted in both high-income and low-income communities. For example, in 2020-2021, 64% of low-income elementary schools offered no clubs at all, as did 61% of high-income schools. In secondary schools, the club offerings dropped by more than half compared to pre-COVID-19.

“It is difficult and sad that we have no special events, assemblies, sports, clubs, guest speakers or field trips to offer this year. These are the activities that make school fun and meaningful for the students. Having virtual school assemblies, for example, are a poor substitute for connecting the whole school community and encouraging school spirit. This year feels hollow and disconnected. Fundraising is affected. Our School Council is struggling to find ways to support the school.”

in-person elementary, Southwest Ontario

Why extracurricular activities matter

When everything is working ideally, public education gives students the knowledge, skills, and competencies they need to succeed in the classroom and beyond. However, the key to a successful public education system is not just in curricula and classroom experience.

Extracurricular activities and experiential opportunities beyond the classroom are vital components of students' development, their well-being, health, achievement, and their capacity for continued success. Foundational competencies, which People for Education generally refers to as The New Basics, are often developed through engagement in sports, performances, as well as a range of clubs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), social justice, LGBTQ, various cultures, arts, academic competitions, ecology, the environment and much more. These experiences help students explore, and engage with, a wide range of identities and interests and develop competencies that students need now and in the future (Stuart et al., 2011).

Fundraising inequities

For as many years as People for Education has researched fundraising for extracurricular activities, we have raised concerns about inequities in opportunities and access between schools with higher and lower median family incomes.

Because of the pandemic, these activities and opportunities became difficult, if not impossible, to provide. The amount of money raised for activities fell. And the inequity became less visible as the responsibility for extracurricular activities fell to families who may, or may not have, the resources to provide them outside of school. In addition, we found that schools that did raise funds, did so for different purposes than in pre-COVID-19 times. One school raised funds to provide food to community families who were struggling, others to buy technology to make virtual learning possible.

“We are not a school of wealth and since the virtual learning platform, all of our old technology has been sent home to support those students. Our staff and students do not have technology to access curriculum regularly. Fundraising efforts were put to a halt and those that have been able to support are giving us a lot less since they are struggling to pay their own bills and are afraid of another shutdown. We are seeing a huge decline in our fundraising support.”

in-person elementary, Southwest Ontario

The challenge when it's over

The loss of opportunities to experience, collaborate, enhance skills, organize, and play through extracurricular activities - especially for those who do not have the resources at home to replicate those experiences - mean that when students return to their classrooms full time, the equity gap in their potential educational experience could be wider than ever (Alhadeff, S., 2019). The question becomes how will this be addressed? What can schools do to address the experience/opportunity gap?

“I find the equity piece being a real issue during the pandemic. We are in a low socio-economic demographic and don't have a strong ability to fundraise or have extra money to support the learning or community building activities during a year like this. The options often available to us from the board to give free field trips etc. are no longer. We don't have money for virtual assemblies or speakers, and we need more technology than we have. As we can't raise the funds for these things, we go without, while many other schools have the capacity to do these great things with their kids. When talking equity as a board and a province we need to keep in mind the poverty piece as well.”

in-person elementary, Southwest Ontario

The impact of COVID-19 on extra-curricular activities in elementary and secondary schools in Ontario

Principals from 1173 schools from across Ontario participated in the 2020/21 Annual School Survey. This includes 906 in-person, 226 hybrid, and 41 virtual schools.

In the survey, we asked about the challenges schools were facing in COVID-19, about the availability of childcare, professional development for staff, and extracurricular activities and fundraising.

This report focuses on the availability of extracurricular activities - clubs and other broader opportunities including sports, performances, and field trips. These are key components of positive school climates and of students' experience and engagement in school.

This year we saw a dramatic drop in the percentage of schools offering these kinds of opportunities. See Figures 1 and 2.

“We have taken traditional clubs (i.e. social justice, eco etc.) and asked specific classroom cohorts to provide leadership. For example, one classroom organizing a food drive. We are very challenged as to how to provide opportunities for clubs across cohorts. All of our extra technology has been sent to our remote learning families.”

Hybrid Secondary school, GTA

Impact on broader opportunities in elementary and secondary schools

Percentage of elementary schools offering broader opportunities

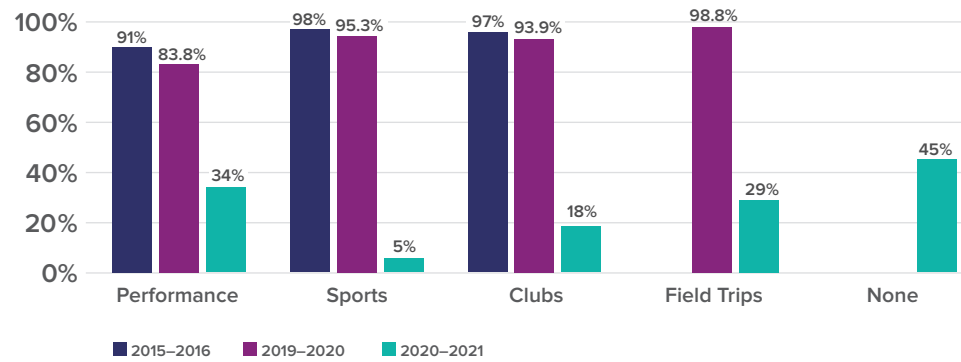


FIGURE 1. Broader educational opportunities at elementary schools, 2015/2016-2020/2021. People for Education, 2021

Percentage of secondary schools offering broader opportunities

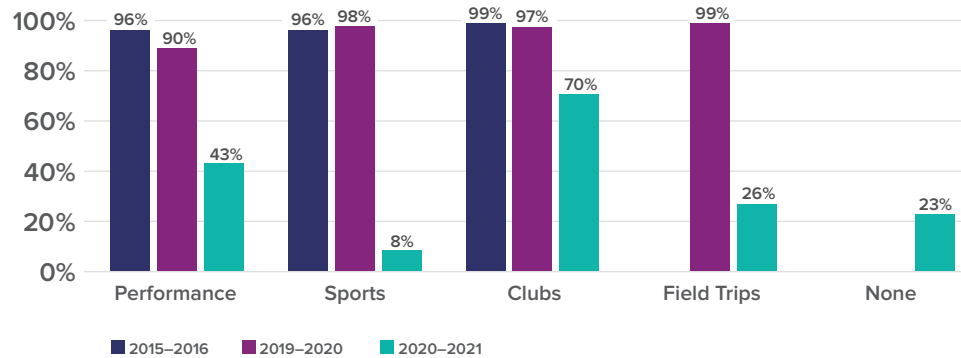


FIGURE 2. Broader educational opportunities at secondary schools, 2015/2016-2020/2021. People for Education, 2021

Impact on school clubs in elementary and secondary schools

In 2020-2021, there was also a substantial decrease in the percentage of elementary (Figure 3) and secondary schools (Figure 4) offering clubs of any kind compared to the previous academic year.

Specific clubs offered at elementary schools

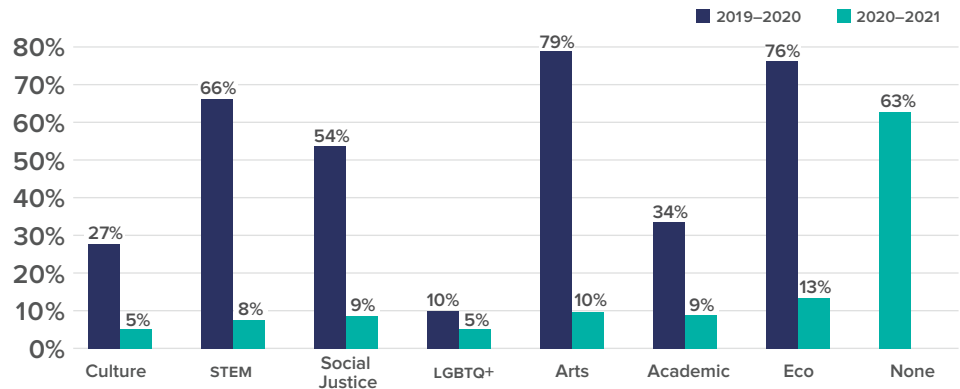


FIGURE 3.
Clubs offered at elementary schools.
People for Education, 2021

Specific clubs offered at secondary schools

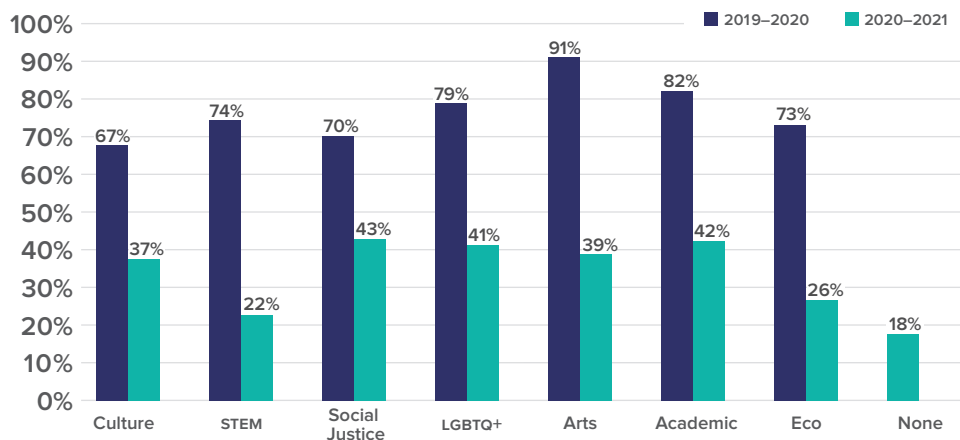


FIGURE 4.
Clubs offered at secondary schools.
People for Education, 2021

Why this matters to students' success

Student participation in broader opportunities through their school encourages the development of skills such as thinking creatively and critically, collaborating, communicating effectively, learning to learn, and developing a sense of self and society – what People for Education refers to as The New Basics. A recent study of more than 28,000 Grade 7 students in British Columbia found that, “Extracurricular participation was associated with better mental health in boys and girls.” (Oberle, E., 2020).

Participation in all these broader opportunities helps students develop vital competencies, giving them experiences in the world beyond the classroom. And it develops students’ cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Cultural, social, and symbolic capital can be thought of as stores of assets that are valuable socially, such as forming helpful social relationships (social capital), being seen as accomplished or respectable (cultural capital) and being perceived overall as skilled or successful (symbolic capital).

“Consider situations in which students can only participate in certain school and extracurricular programs if they are able to pay program fees or be available outside of the regular school schedule. In these scenarios, school populations can become divided by possession of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capitals. These divisions in access can result in an environment in which opportunity to acquire capitals is largely available only to those who already possess them in large amounts”
(Cowley, 2020)

For students in Ontario’s public schools, participating in an activity like an academic club or organized sport helps them develop this social capital. They obviously learn new skills and make new friends, but it also exposes them to new expectations and new ways of navigating society, and it helps develop their public social identity. In short, they are perceived differently by those around them, and they learn how to engage with the societal and educational systems in new ways.

The benefits extend beyond secondary school. Extracurricular activities help students build resources that help them graduate and to succeed beyond graduation (Stuart et al., 2011). They are linked to university admissions as well as university students' degree attainment and future employment (Harvard University Press (2020). Indeed, social, cultural, and symbolic capital is linked to enrolment in, and graduation from, post-secondary schooling (e.g., Davies & Aurini, 2011; Parekh & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2017).

Fundraising inequities and the COVID-19 challenge

In all the years People for Education has been tracking fundraising in schools, more than 90% of schools, on average, report fundraising for everything from field trips to playgrounds. Despite the evidence that supports the importance of extracurricular activities to student success and well-being, the gnawing reality is that they are often dependent on the time and skills school communities are able to devote to fundraising. Our 2019-2020 data showed that a greater percentage of high-income schools offered all the clubs and sports tracked in our survey, at least in part because high-income schools are able to raise the funds required to offer them. Our research also noted that schools in high-income areas are able to raise much more money than schools in lower-income neighbourhoods (People for Education, 2018).

Overall steep decline

In this pandemic year, there was a decline in the percentage of schools that reported fundraising along with a decline in the average amounts fundraised per school. Per school fundraising totals for in-person and hybrid schools, ranged from \$0 to \$180,000 in elementary schools and \$0 to \$60,000 in secondary schools

Average fundraising in **high-income** elementary schools

- 2019-2020 survey: \$21,260
- 2020-2021 survey: \$15,197

Average fundraising in **low-income** elementary schools

- 2019-2020 survey: \$10,872
- 2020-2021 survey: \$6,978

COVID-19 impacts on how fundraising was used

During COVID-19, not only was the fundraising amount lower across the board, but what schools bought with the funds was different. Pre-pandemic, schools used raised funds or donated funds to support a wide variety of activities — including field trips, organized sports, music programs, and special events — and to offset student and activity fees.

In having to adapt to teaching during the pandemic, some funds were used to provide technology for schools, basic school supplies to prevent sharing resources, and in some cases, basic needs for families including food.

“We fundraise/receive donations for food and other necessities for families in our community in need.”

in-person elementary, Eastern Ontario

“We have a lot of needy families and have maxed out on the amount we can get for them.”

in-person elementary, GTA

Among in-person and hybrid schools:

- 43% and 25% (respectively) reported that they had to use fundraising/donations to cover the costs of technology
- 9% and 8% (respectively) fundraised for basic school supplies

Ontario’s *Guideline for School Fundraising* specifies that funds raised must be used “to complement, not replace, public funding for education,” and that schools cannot fundraise for things like learning materials and textbooks, items that would increase the operating costs of the school, or administrative expenses. However, the guidelines did not anticipate a pandemic and have not been updated. They are not clear when it comes to things such as HEPA filters and other measures that keep students and staff safe.

“[We] have accepted donations of hand sanitizer, face shields, also school advisory funds traditionally distributed to each class at start up. This year extra funds went to increased school supplies to avoid sharing. (e.g., each student has glue, scissors, own set of markers etc.)”

in-person elementary, Eastern Ontario

Has your school had to use fundraising or donations to cover the cost of the following?

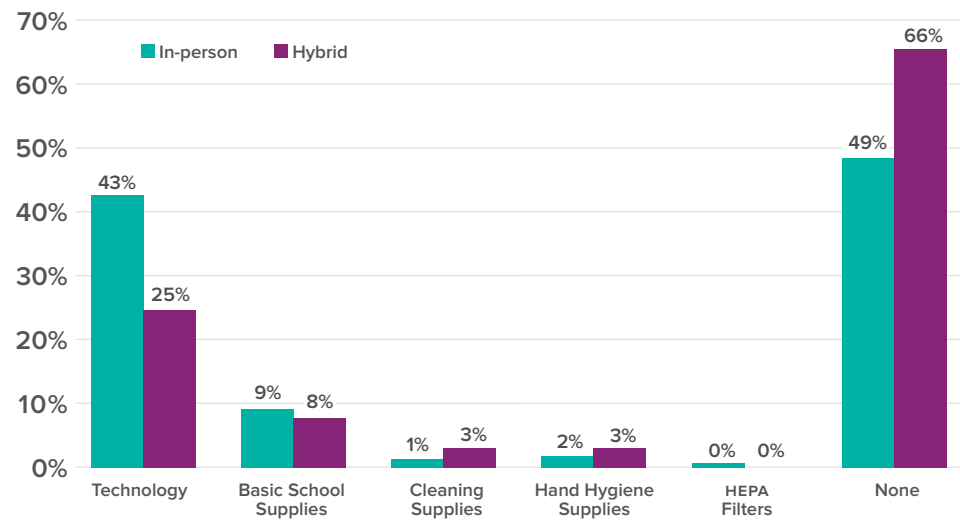


FIGURE 5.
Use of fundraising/donations to cover costs.
People for Education, 2021

“ I used \$14,000 of previously saved fundraising money to buy a new class set of Chromebooks. ”
in-person elementary, Northern Ontario

“ We purchased guitars for our music class as we cannot use wind instruments. We also purchased walkies so that the outdoor classrooms had access to the office. ”
in-person elementary/secondary, Southwest Ontario

The hidden gap

For students in lower income families, the broadened opportunities afforded them through school are sometimes the only way to get those experiences. During COVID-19, their abilities to develop their social “capital” has been diminished. If families could not provide the resources to make up for the loss of broadened opportunities, the traditional inequity between high- and low-income school experience may have grown. This is a hidden gap that will need attention.

Data from StatsCan, and others, show that students in high-income families are more likely to have the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities (Statistics Canada, 2008). That opportunity gap remained true during the pandemic, even if those experiences were virtual.

“**The economic shock due to self-isolation will intensify unhealthy habits as financial constraints limit the ability of young people to participate in recreational and educational opportunities (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). This will, in turn, widen academic achievement gaps between students from high socioeconomic backgrounds and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Affluent students have many educational opportunities outside of school that continue their academic and social development. This is not an option for students from less affluent backgrounds, especially in the wake of COVID-19.**”
Pathways to Education, 2020

These gaps in activities — together with comments from school principals describing the link between socio-economic status, fundraising capacity, COVID-19, and broader educational opportunities — point to missed opportunities to develop valuable competencies and capitals for students in virtual schools.

The challenge once it's over

During COVID-19 schools across Ontario faced a similar loss in broader educational opportunities, whether they were in high-income areas or low-income areas. Schools in the top and bottom 25% median family income had similarly-deflated access to school clubs.

The loss is a significant problem because these broader opportunities build skills identified as the new basics and help students develop their social, cultural, and symbolic capital.

These extracurricular activities have typically been experienced inequitably by Ontario students - with the ability to fundraise being the fulcrum between more or less opportunity. Students in high-income schools typically get more access to more opportunities than students in low-income schools.

The pandemic only made these opportunities more precarious, with clubs, sports, field trips, and other broader educational opportunities being drastically reduced, or cut altogether, due to necessary health and safety guidelines in the 2020-2021 school year.

Fundraising, which can determine the number of opportunities a school can offer, was also diminished. Not only did schools raise less on average, but some schools spent funds on pandemic-specific needs or to support struggling families in their communities.

As with many other aspects of COVID-19, the extent of the pandemic's effect on school clubs, sports, and other opportunities remains uncertain. How might the use of fundraising dollars have shifted during COVID-19 in terms of school needs and restrictions? Might these shifts widen the gap in social, cultural, and symbolic capital between students in high- and low-income schools? What should education policy do to address these issues?

The significance of broader educational opportunities to student competency development has been tracked and studied at the community level and in education research, but inequities in offerings remain.

Both the value of clubs, sports, and opportunities outside the classroom to student well-being and success, and the opportunity gap that COVID-19 may have created, have become evident. As Ontario's public schools work through a "reimagining" of education under the restrictions of life during a pandemic, broader educational opportunities must be recognized not as educational frill, but as part of the vital components of students' development, their well-being, health, achievement, and their capacity for continued success.

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