

The Athletic Advantage: How Districts are Turning School Sports into Community Assets



Carolyn Kester/AP

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Forward-thinking districts are leveraging athletics, technology, and community engagement as powerful tools to support student development and **strengthen school culture**. Reimagining traditional structures—such as youth sports, extracurriculars, and leadership roles—is empowering districts to promote social-emotional learning, inclusivity, and student well-being while addressing challenges like toxic competition and excessive screen time. These articles emphasize the importance of **strong school-family partnerships** and creative approaches like **esports, gaming, and inclusive sports programs** to increase **student engagement and belonging** and boost mental health.



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Ariana Drehsler for Education Week

Students playing basketball at Parkway Sports & Health Science Academy in La Mesa, Calif. Some schools are using sports as a way to help students develop social-emotional skills.

Published February 19, 2026

Want Kids to Have Better SEL Skills? Try Using Sports

By Lauraine Langreo

It's common for teachers to say that today's students are more likely to struggle with regulating their emotions and navigating in-person social interactions compared with those from previous eras.

In an effort to help, many schools are teaching students foundational social-emotional skills—which research shows can play an important role in supporting academic development and overall well-being. At the same time, schools are implementing these programs while also grappling with funding and staffing challenges, as well as the politicization of social-emotional-learning lessons and curricula.

Despite those hurdles, some schools have found an innovative vehicle for weaving character-building skills throughout the school day and after school: sports.

In a recent Education Week online K-12 Essentials Forum, experts and district leaders discussed how to incorporate social-emotional learning into team-focused athletic activities.

“It’s [about] building relationships with students first and foremost.”

JENNIFER MONTEZ

La Mesa-Spring Valley school district, CA

Why sports offer opportunities to introduce or reinforce SEL

Research shows that youth sports, when “intentionally designed to facilitate positive youth development,” can improve young people’s social-emotional skills, such as goal-setting, empathy, self-control, self-efficacy, and socialization with peers, said Megan Bartlett, a panelist during the forum and the founder of the Center for Healing and Justice Through Sport, a national nonprofit that provides coach training and consulting services.

Sports are “uniquely suited” to help young people with their social-emotional development because it combines, “in real time,” three things, Bartlett said:

- A set of adults and peers who make students feel safe, so they can let their guard down and really engage in the activities;
- The opportunity to move their bodies—this has a positive impact on their ability to learn and their emotional regulation; and
- The opportunity to learn to navigate constructive forms of stress and other challenges.

With youth sports, the focus shouldn’t be solely on performance, Bartlett said. It should be focused on mastery, on helping young people see themselves improve on a skill, and on the benefits of having positive interactions with peers, she said.

How one district is incorporating SEL into sports

The La Mesa-Spring Valley school district in California is an example of a district using sports to help students’ social-emotional development.

The district, which serves about 11,000 K-8 students, created a sports league where students don’t just learn how to play a sport, but also how social-emotional skills can help them become better teammates on and off the field, according to the district’s staff members working on extended student services who were on the panel: Jennifer Montez, Heather Spruell, and Trinell Lewis.

The idea came about during the COVID pandemic, said Montez. “We needed to find a way for students to re-engage and to find a reason to come back to school,” she said.

Student athletes practice three times a week before school (for middle school students) or after school (for elementary students).

And once a week, they have a 30-minute SEL lesson facilitated by a social worker and the coach during practice, Montez said.

Those SEL lessons usually focus on things like emotional regulation, building team bonds and trust, and handling wins and losses, Lewis said.

The coaches and school leaders have seen a transformation in many of the students who go through the program, Spruell said. For instance, many kids enter the program not knowing how to handle losses, and they end up blaming teammates and having meltdowns. But as they go through the program, they are able to better handle losses and encourage their teammates, she said.

Tips for other districts that want to do something similar

- The panelists shared tips for other districts or schools that want to use sports to help students with their social-emotional development.
- Don't overthink it, Montez said. "It's [about] building relationships with students first and foremost," she said. It's also important to invest in the staff and the coaches who are teaching the kids the skills they need to succeed on and off the field.
- Get buy-in from principals and school social workers, Spruell said. They need to understand why SEL-focused efforts are worthwhile and what their roles will be in making a program like this work.
- Make sure coaches have the right kind of training, Bartlett said. "We coach the way we were coached, and you have to undo some of that in order to really focus on the right things," she said. ■

Published February 09, 2026

Youth Sports Can Turn Toxic. This District Focuses on Prevention

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Sportsmanship may sound like a dated term, but the core idea behind it remains deeply relevant: athletes, coaches, and spectators behaving fairly, respectfully, and safely.

While athletic directors and coaches still strive to impart those values in their players, they have far less control over how adults on the sidelines behave.

That loss of control is showing up nationwide. In a 2023 national survey about conduct at sporting events that polled nearly 36,000 sports officials across all levels of competition, 69% of respondents agreed that sportsmanship at sporting events is getting worse, and half reported they did not feel safe while officiating. Coaches aren't immune, either. In one incident that made national headlines, a youth football coach in St. Louis was shot multiple times by a parent who disagreed with the victim's coaching style. The perpetrator was later found guilty of assault and armed criminal action and sentenced to 13 years in jail.

Experts say the increasingly transactional nature of youth sports—where parents equate athletic success with future college scholarships or professional careers—has fueled this behavior. That reality leaves athletic directors and coaches trying to reset expectations for both families and players.

April Brooks, the executive director of athletics and activities at the Jefferson County Public School district, says her approach focuses on prevention—building relationships, setting clear expectations, and preparing staff for worst-case scenarios before they unfold.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How has the culture of youth sports changed since you were a kid?

I would say there's a lot more disgruntled families than what I remember as an athlete. I also think social media makes people think they need to have a voice about everything. And sometimes, people put out a false narrative based on their opinion.

I talk a lot about building relationships—between athletic directors and coaches, coaches



Madeleine Hordinski for Education Week

Dr. April Brooks, director of athletics for Jefferson County Public Schools, leads a clinic at Medora Elementary School in Louisville, Ky.

and families, and athletes. I also promote our 24-hour rule for parents and student-athletes: If you do have something that you're upset about, you have to wait 24 hours to set up that meeting, so you have some time to think about what's happened before you have a potentially explosive conversation that's not going to go well.

How is the transactional nature of youth sports affecting high school athletics?

In lots of ways. I see more kids transferring schools when they're not happy with the coach. Sometimes, their families think: If we go to this other school, my child is going to get more playing time, more college looks, or whatever the case may be.

But high school sports can build community, too. How are you promoting that positive message?

I've really tried to work on marketing and using my social media platform to get people out to the district's sporting events. Sometimes I get on the local radio to promote them. It's been exciting to see the number of spectators increase as a

result. So I think it's just a matter of letting people know what's going on. Often, negativity spreads quickly. But when there's something positive going on around youth, it doesn't always get out there as fast. So I really like to promote the positive things going on in our district.

How do you try to adjust families' expectations around sports?

We tell parents: We don't know where your kid's going to go athletically, but we do need to make sure that they have a backup plan, so we can't just focus on the athletic part of their career.

They need to know that students have an opportunity to get academic scholarships, not just athletic scholarships. Sometimes, you don't get a full ride to college. We even show them the statistics: Very few people make it to the NFL or the NBA.

What messages do you encourage coaches to impart to student-athletes?

We want to make sure that they're developing all their skills at a high level. Attitude is a

big part of it. Effort is a big part of it, too. We tell them that it's not just about your talent.

How do you prepare for the potential of poor sportsmanship—from either athletes or spectators?

We have monthly athletic director meetings, and every meeting, I come up with some sort of scenario that could possibly happen, and we talk it through. Like, have you had a parent meeting to tell your families about what the expectations are at sporting events? Are these expectations posted in the gym about how you want spectators to act during a game? Where's your security if an incident happens? We're trying to be as proactive as possible so that we don't have those parent issues.

How effective are these planning sessions?

Things still pop up. Sometimes, we have to escort families out who don't want to follow the rules. The most important thing that we want to happen at a game is that everybody's safe—athletes, spectators, and referees included. We also want an opportunity for people to be able to have fun.

What's your advice on how athletic administrators can create a culture of sportsmanship in their districts?

My best advice is to always put students first, and to be proactive about teaching sportsmanship to student-athletes, coaches, families, and other support staff by setting clear guidelines—during coaches' clinics, parent meetings, athletic director meetings, and when creating student-athlete contracts at the beginning of the season. Then, reiterate these messages through spectator announcements and venue signage. And lead by example; it has to come from the top. Safety and sportsmanship are two areas we must focus on to protect student-athletes. ■

Published February 20, 2026

What Lessons Did the Olympics Offer for Educators and Students?

By Jennifer Vilcarino

As the 2026 Winter Olympic Games come to a close, the competitions leave behind valuable lessons for both educators and students alike.

This year, the premier international multisport event was hosted in Italy, with over 2,800 athletes from more than 200 nations taking part. Educators have long capitalized on Olympic competitions to convey lessons about resilience, teamwork, and coping with disappointment, among other takeaways.

For example, in the 2020 Tokyo Games, when Simone Biles chose to withdraw from the final individual all-around Gymnastics event, many criticized her for quitting. However, she later returned to compete again at the 2024 Paris Games and won three gold medals and one silver medal, becoming an inspiration, particularly for women and girls, showing her resilience and determination.

Julia Rafal-Baer, the CEO and founder of Women Leading Ed, a nonprofit network of women education leaders, said the lessons from Biles' experience were relevant in district leadership, too.

"Leaders in education and other fields can learn from Biles," Rafal wrote in an opinion piece in Education Week. "Her challenges mirror many of those that women in top leadership positions must deal with daily."

Teachers have used the Olympics to reinforce the idea that everyone needs coaching. Many athletes rewatch their previous Olympic events to understand and learn from their mistakes. Similarly, teachers can record themselves in a classroom and evaluate areas for improvement.

In addition, the Olympic Games are also an opportunity to learn about history, geography, and math. For example, students can create tables of results and graph data points to make predictions for remaining events. Older students can try to estimate the economic impact of the event on the host country.

For the 2012 Summer Olympics, Education Week reported on a set of video resources, created with support from the National Science Foundation, meant to help teachers and students draw connections between the games and science and engineering.



Carolyn Kaster/AP

United States players celebrate after beating Canada in overtime in the women's ice hockey gold medal game at the 2026 Winter Olympics, in Milan, Italy. The Olympics have been used in schools as important lessons for educators and students.

Those resources were designed to help educators connect STEM to events such as swimming and track and field.

In a recent social media post, Education Week asked an online audience how they believed the Olympics could offer skills that students and educators could pick up.

Online commenters put forward a number of ideas. The responses have been edited lightly for length and clarity.

Using the games as inspiration

Reality is that not everyone has the resources or tools for this level of professional sports, but can still strive for excellence.

—Harold L.

The participants who reached that level did so because they never gave up, despite everything.

—Benjamin K.

There is a social-emotional aspect to the games

Kindness, resilience, empathy, self-confidence, respect, and discipline.

—Elaine L.

Confidence not arrogance.

—Dawne B. ■

Your Scoreboard Is Older Than Your Students. It's Time to Rethink What It Can Do.



There is a scoreboard in nearly every K-12 athletic facility in America. Many of them are failing. And almost none are doing what today's technology—and today's financial models—make possible.

The average U.S. school building is approaching 50 years old, and K-12 districts face an estimated \$270 billion in deferred infrastructure repairs, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers' 2025 Infrastructure Report Card, which gave U.S. schools a D+. Athletic display infrastructure is rarely the most urgent item on a deferred maintenance list—but it is among the most visible. When a scoreboard fails on a Friday night, the whole community notices.

The good news: the financial model for addressing this problem has fundamentally changed. Modernizing athletic displays no longer requires a bond measure or a boost-

er campaign. For a growing number of schools across the country, it requires nothing from the district budget at all.

The Hidden Cost of "Good Enough"

Aging scoreboards carry costs that rarely appear in a single budget line. Repair calls accumulate. Parts become unavailable for obsolete systems. Legacy display technology cannot support modern scoring formats, multi-sport configurations, video capabilities, or the emergency notification functions today's administrators require.

The consequences extend beyond operations. Athletic facilities are among the most community-facing assets a district manages—where families gather, alumni return, and community members form their impression of a district's investment in its students. A deteriorating scoreboard sends a visible signal, and in an environment where districts compete for enrollment and community confidence, that signal matters.

31% of outdoor athletic facilities at U.S. public schools are rated "fair" or "poor" condition, and more than half of all public schools need investment to reach "good" condition. — ASCE, 2025

A New Financial Model Changes the Equation

The traditional path to a new scoreboard runs through the capital budget or the booster club. Capital budgets are stretched. Booster fundraising takes years. Meanwhile, the old board keeps failing.

What has changed is the emergence of community sponsorship models that allow schools to modernize at zero capital cost. Local businesses purchase digital advertising on the school's new displays. That revenue funds the installation, covers ongoing support, and in many cases generates net income for the school's athletic programs over the life of the partnership.

At Quincy Notre Dame High School in Quincy, Illinois, Athletic Director Bill Connell described the impact di-

rectly. Before switching to digital video scoreboards, the school sold 10-12 static ads annually.

After the upgrade, that number jumped to 70 digital ads.

"If your high school is looking at using the advertising money for that board, it's going to pay for itself within three or four years for sure. If you're aggressive going out and selling ads, it could pay for itself in just a couple years."

— Bill Connell, Athletic Director, Quincy Notre Dame High School, Quincy, IL

For districts that have adopted this model, the result is a modern LED system, installation, and multi-year technical support—funded entirely by the community the school already serves.

How Forward-Thinking Districts Are Turning Athletic Facilities Into Community Assets

When a school modernizes its athletic display infrastructure through a community sponsorship model, the impact extends well beyond the scoreboard. It changes the relationship between the school and the businesses, families, and organizations that make up its community.

At Notre Dame Regional High School in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, the decision to modernize was easy. The school partnered with Digital Scoreboards and a sponsorship management company to install displays across the entire campus. The financial structure required zero dollars up front.

“There was zero money up front. We didn’t put a penny up. Once the sponsorship company is paid back, there’s a revenue split—and we’re tapping a different revenue stream than we ever had before.”

— Booster Club Member, Notre Dame Regional High School, Cape Girardeau, MO

Athletic Director Jeff Graviett described what changed in how the school funds its programs: “We were always seeking donations. You’re selling digital advertising—and that is a much easier sell than a static sign.”

The community impact was equally significant. When every sport in the facility operates on the same modern platform, every team competes in a facility the school is proud of—what Notre Dame’s leadership described as equity across programs, with every student athlete receiving the same quality of experience.

Three Pillars of the Modern Athletic Facility Strategy

PILLAR 1. Modern Display Infrastructure

Today’s LED scoreboards support video playback, animated graphics, sponsor recognition, emergency notifications, and multi-sport configurations from a single system. At Buford High School in Buford, Georgia, Digital Scoreboards installed over 8,500 square feet of LED displays—including a 44’ x 82’ centerpiece board, a 400’ ribbon display, and a 44’ x 82’ parking lot display—for a 10,000-seat

Advertisement

stadium that hosted a nationally televised ESPN game at its August 2025 opener.

“This stadium represents more than just a technological achievement; it’s a community beacon for students, families, and fans,” said Chris Kirn, President and CEO of Digital Scoreboards.

At Palisades High School in Pennsylvania—the largest school district by square miles in the state—Athletic Director Brian Gilbert described the reaction after upgrading: “When our team crosses the street to come in on a Friday night and we’re playing our entrance video, not only our fans but the away fans are kind of in awe and probably a little jealous of what we’re able to provide.”

PILLAR 2. The Community Revenue Model

The sponsorship model works as follows: a school partners with a sponsorship management program, like DS Media, that identifies and sells advertising to local businesses. Revenue covers the display system, installation, and ongoing support over a multi-year term. Once the system is paid off, the school retains a share of advertising revenue annually. Digital Scoreboards backs every installation with a parts and labor warranty that is significantly longer than the industry standard of three to five years—along with 365-day technical support and live diagnostics monitoring.

PILLAR 3. The Educational Dividend

K-12 Career and Technical Education enrollment grew 10% between the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years, reaching 8.6 million students nationally, per the U.S. Department of Education. Six in 10 educators surveyed by EdWeek Research Center report their districts’ CTE offerings have grown in the past five years, with digital technology and media production pathways among the fastest-growing areas of student interest.

Source: U.S. Department of Education; EdWeek Research Center Survey, 2025

Through DS Academy—an 8-level project-based digital media curriculum—students learn video production, graphic design, sports journalism, broadcast operations, and digital marketing using their school’s own scoreboard as a studio. The curriculum is aligned to CTE career pathway standards and designed so any teacher can deliver it regardless of prior media experience. Students graduate with a multi-year portfolio in a high-demand skills area.

71% of educators surveyed by EdWeek Research Center said students’ interest in CTE has increased in the past five years. Pathways related to digital technology and media production ranked among the fastest-growing areas. (EdWeek Research Center, 2025)

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Digital Scoreboards Builds the Campus

Modern LED displays for athletic facilities, gyms, outdoor stadiums, and campus-wide installations—backed by 365-day support, live diagnostics, and up to an 11 year parts and labor warranty.

DS Media Generates Revenue

A turnkey sponsorship program connecting schools with local advertisers. Revenue covers the installation and generates ongoing income—at zero capital outlay to the district.

DS Education Creates Careers

DS Academy is an 8-level digital media curriculum where students learn video production, broadcast operations, graphic design, and live event management using the school's own scoreboard as a studio.

What This Looks Like for a District

A district partners with Digital Scoreboards to assess its current athletic display infrastructure—gymnasiums, outdoor fields, auxiliary spaces. Digital Scoreboards designs a solution scaled to the school's facilities and community profile.

DS Media conducts a market analysis to confirm local advertising demand, then manages the entire sponsorship program: identifying business partners, selling packages, handling contracts, and delivering annual revenue reporting to the school. The district receives a fully installed, modern LED system with no capital outlay. Over the life of the partnership, the school earns a share of advertising revenue directed toward athletic programming, equipment, or other facility needs.

DS Education provides teachers and students with DS Academy—structured lesson plans, assessment rubrics, and direct support from curriculum specialists, designed so any classroom teacher can implement it. Students produce content for games, community events, and school announcements. The scoreboard that once cost money

to maintain now generates revenue and supports student learning.

As Quincy Notre Dame's Bill Connell put it: "A lot of it is the partnership that we have with Digital Scoreboards. We believe in them, and we believe in the products that they put out there."

Questions Worth Asking Before Your Next Facilities Decision

What is the true cost of maintaining your current athletic display infrastructure through the next five years?

- Has your district explored a community sponsorship model as an alternative to capital funding or booster campaigns?
- Are there CTE or career-readiness pathways at your school that a structured digital media curriculum could support?
- What would it mean for community engagement if local businesses were visible, invested partners in your school's athletic programs?

About Digital Scoreboards

Since 2014, Digital Scoreboards has partnered with K-12 schools and colleges across the country to modernize athletic display infrastructure. DS Media connects schools with community sponsors to fund installations at zero capital cost. DS Education's DS Academy curriculum gives students a structured, multi-year pathway in media production, broadcast operations, and digital communications—using their school's own scoreboard as a studio.

digitalscoreboards.net





Madeleine Hordinski for Education Week

Dr. April Brooks, director of athletics for Jefferson County Public Schools (center), watches a boys' varsity basketball game at Jeffersontown High School in Louisville, Ky.

Published February 09, 2026

Meet the 'Sports Lady' Reenergizing Her District's Athletics

By Elizabeth Heubeck

April Brooks has become a familiar face in the Jefferson County public schools, where she oversees athletics and activities across the Louisville, Ky., district. Her visibility is key to building relationships that support her goal of setting high, and inclusive, expectations around youth sports.

"When I go into elementary schools, the kids are like, 'There's the sports lady!' I love it. That's me," she said.

For elementary school students to recognize any athletic director is unusual, let alone one who oversees 52 school-based athletic directors and some 10,000 student-athletes. Athletic directors typically work behind the scenes, managing packed competition schedules, hiring and supporting qualified coaches, and ensuring games run smoothly for student-athletes and spectators alike.

Then again, Brooks, 43, stands out, even in a sea of athletic directors anywhere. And not just for her tall, athletic presence, honed during her days as a celebrated athlete at JCPS

in the 1990s, when she captained her high school track team.

Brooks is the first Black woman to serve as executive director of athletics and activities at JCPS, and she works in a profession that remains overwhelmingly male. About 80% of the nation's K-12 athletic directors are male, and 66% are white, according to recent national data.

Brooks' hire is good for the profession. It's also good for the students in her district. "The fact that Dr. Brooks is working in a community she came up in lets girls get to see her not only as a woman and a leader, which is unique and inspiring, but they also are seeing a woman who came from where they came from. Automatically, there's a certain level of buy-in that comes from having a shared lived experience that she's bringing to the table," said Daycia McClam, vice president of community engagement and advocacy for the Positive Coaching Alliance, a national nonprofit that advocates for improving youth sports.

That visibility is essential—not incidental—to the goals Brooks has set for the district. Those goals include keeping the districts'

top student-athletes in public schools rather than losing them to better-resourced private schools and significantly boosting girls' participation in sports.

"I want more kids to have opportunities to do something positive that gives them a stronger sense of belonging in their school and keeps them away from the streets and other negative things that could be going on," Brooks, a 2026 Leader To Learn From honoree, said. "So I think everything that I'm trying to do with sports coincides with them being better in the classroom, being leaders in the classroom, and being leaders on the field."

Facing a post-pandemic sports-participation slump

Brooks took the helm of Jefferson County's athletics department during the 2021-22 school year, when the district saw its lowest sports-participation numbers in years. The decline mirrored what was happening nationally: High school sports participation dipped 4% between 2018-19 and 2021-22, with a greater decrease in girls' participation than boys'.

At a December hearing of the Committee on Education and Workforce, U.S. Rep. Kevin Kiley, R-Calif., a former educator, said 70% of children quit organized sports by age 13, calling the trend "a loss of one of the most effective tools we have to combat rising isolation and mental health challenges in our children."

Overall participation in high school sports is hard to track. The numbers vary by state, gender, and individual sport (for instance, at least 21% fewer girls are playing high school basketball now compared to 2000, according to National Federation of State High School Associations survey data). Over the past 23 years, high school sports nationwide saw peak participation in 2011 of 55.1% and a post-pandemic low in 2021 of 49.1%. Recovery has been slow and uneven, with the latest data from 2023 showing 51.9% participation, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Inequity played a major role in post-pandemic declines in high school sports, say experts. During school closures, student-athletes from higher-income families could continue training through private gyms and clubs, Ann Paulls-Neal, the head coach of girls' track and field at Highland High School in Albuquerque, N.M., said.

Student-athletes from underresourced families didn't have that same access. Many were also responsible for caring for siblings

while parents worked, especially in districts like JCPS, Brooks said.

In Jefferson County, where 66% of the district's more than 96,000 students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, high school athletics participation plummeted to 6,632 students in 2021-22, down from 9,607 in 2017-18—a 30% drop. Girls were especially underrepresented, with about 1,500 fewer girls than boys playing sports.

Even after schools reopened, JCPS continued to confront additional barriers to athletic participation. Private schools with turf fields, stadium seating, and modern facilities drew some top athletes away. At the same time, Brooks noticed that many girls who could be participating simply weren't.

The decline in girls' sports participation isn't unique to JCPS. "We see a huge drop in sports participation among girls between the ages of 9 and 13," said McClam.

Many communities lack athletic opportunities for girls-only teams that emphasize development. And as girls approach adolescence, they may become increasingly uncomfortable playing on mixed-gender teams, McClam said. Also, the growing number of competitive travel sports teams starting at ever-younger ages draws mostly affluent families that can pay for equipment and related fees. The outliers who stick with sports, said McClam, tend to be girls identified from a young age as talented athletes. And they are apt to join teams—and schools—with the best resources.

So Brooks had a lot of work to do to make JCPS a place where the best student-athletes wanted to stay and play for their local public school and where students underrepresented on the playing fields and courts—especially girls—opted to stick with or give high school sports a try.

Brooks faced these challenges while new to the position and uncertain of how receptive her colleagues would be to her. Her background, going back to her childhood, prepared her well for what lay ahead.

Growing up in a sports family

Brooks' approach to leadership is rooted in her upbringing. She comes from an extended family of athletes: Her father was a quarterback at the University of Kentucky; an aunt ran track and field for a state championship-winning team in college; and an uncle played basketball at the University of Louisville before playing professionally with the Utah Jazz.

Sports were central to family life. Neighborhood games of dodgeball and kickball topped Brooks' fondest childhood memories—and she usually held her own. "My dad would always tell all the neighborhood boys that I was the fastest girl and that I could beat all of them," said Brooks, who admitted to proving him right. "He taught me and my sister that girls could do anything that boys could do."

That confidence carried into high school, where Brooks ran track and cross-country and eventually captained the track team. "Becoming the captain of my high school track team taught me how to get people to rally around a common goal," said Brooks, who went on to run track at the University of Kentucky.

She learned early to lead by example—showing up early, staying late, and doing the work herself. That philosophy still defines her leadership style.

"I do every job that I expect everybody else to do," Brooks said. "So you may see me in the concession stand, you may see me taking tickets. You may see me putting numbers on for kids and getting ready for a relay—wherever I'm needed."

Breaking into a male-dominated field

Brooks' career trajectory prepared her for standing out. As a student, she was often one of the only Black students in advanced academic classes and in cross-country, which remains predominantly white.

"My parents always taught me that we love everybody, we accept everybody," she said.

Brooks' groundbreaking hire doesn't seem to have fazed her, but it resonated across the district.

"If you take a look at the landscape of our athletic directors in the district, it's mostly white men," said Robert Moore, the chief of schools at JCPS. "And now, there's this strong Black female stepping in to lead a group that hasn't been led by anyone that looks like her."

To female employees in the district's athletic department, the hire felt validating. "We thought either the guy who was at the middle school would just get promoted or some other guy, somewhere in some other department, would get the job," said Leslie Lintelman, who oversees middle school athletics at JCPS.

The district's decision to hire Brooks came as somewhat of a relief to Lintelman. "It al-

most felt like a weight lifted off your shoulders. You felt that empowerment, like, this is somebody I can relate to," she said.

Empowering girls through sports starts early

One of Brooks' early priorities was expanding girls' access to sports. Working with Lintelman, she helped launch the district's first all-girls elementary basketball league, giving girls a dedicated space to play and build confidence.

To generate interest in the all-girls' elementary basketball league, Brooks visited many physical education classes at the district's elementary schools. She admits the task was made easier by the recent popularity of Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese, Women's National Basketball Association players she included in her video presentations to elementary students.

"Now, we have this kind of pipeline of little girls who are enjoying the sport, and then we're getting them into their middle school teams, and then from their middle school teams, they'll go on to play in high school," Brooks said.

Expanding opportunities and listening to students

Brooks felt good about her efforts to build a pipeline of female athletes from a young age. But that wouldn't fix the post-pandemic drop-off of sports participation in the district, which had hit girls particularly hard.

"When I looked at that data, I noticed that, after COVID, we really had a decline in females' sports participation, particularly among African American females—we were thousands of students down," she said.

Looking for answers, Brooks asked girls in the district: What sport would you like to play that we're not offering?

The answer was clear: flag football.

Girls' flag football has surged nationwide in the past few years, with 17 states sanctioning it as a high school sport by the fall of 2025, according to NFL FLAG, the official flag football league of the NFL, and experts predict many more will follow.

With the support of the district's high school athletic directors, Brooks launched a club-level flag football program in 2024, with seven girls' teams districtwide. This year, it's up to 13 teams of between 20 to 25 athletes per team, she said, and interest continues to grow in the new sport. Among the 174 female stu-

dents playing in the districtwide flag football program, 122 are Black, 26 are white; 26 identify as “other.”

Competing with better-resourced schools

Brooks also confronted facility disparities head-on. Athletic ambassadors—middle school students—surveyed peers who weren’t participating. Many cited better-funded club teams outside the school setting as why they chose them over school-based sports.

“I was honest with our superintendent. I said, ‘I want you to go out there and look at some of these [private] school facilities,’” Brooks said. “They’ve got college-like stadiums, new locker rooms, turf fields, bleachers, concession stands.”

The superintendent responded in 2022 with a long-term plan to add about five turf fields to the district per year. So far, 10 of the fields have been installed. The district also invested in two college-level gymnasium floors that allow it to host tournaments. New indoor and outdoor bleachers are also part of the plan.

Community support in the form of tax money has facilitated some of these changes, Brooks said. But to generate additional funding, Brooks launched an annual Celebration of Champions gala, which recognizes the district’s athletes. Despite early skepticism, Lintelman said, the event has raised more than \$100,000 in two years, funding equipment, scholarships, uniforms, and facility upgrades.

In another effort to support districtwide athletics, Brooks has partnered with the University of Louisville to secure sports-administration interns. They gain valuable experience to pad their resumes for future work opportunities, and JCPS gets extra support at athletic events and for related behind-the-scenes tasks.

‘Always on call’

Athletics leadership is a round-the-clock job, said Brooks, and delegating at least some tasks is necessary.

“We’re constantly on call,” she said—responding to injuries, facility issues, or last-minute staffing needs.

“It’s not just throwing the balls out. It’s making sure that the refs are there. It’s making sure that you have an announcer. It’s making sure that you have ticket takers. It’s making sure that the kids have water,” she said. “I don’t think people realize the time commit-

ment away from their own families it takes to support student-athletes: the nights, the weekends, when most teachers and administrators are gone, the athletic director is still there.”

These days, attending sporting events generally means she’s working. But Brooks brings the same enthusiasm to athletics that she has since she was a little girl, which makes the job fun.

“I’ve learned so much more about so many different sports. I’m at bowling championships, swim championships. How cool is that? I never thought I’d be at a bowling championship,” Brooks said. “And I really think what these cheerleaders do is pretty fantastic. I’m kind of wowed by cheer and dance.” ■



Laurie Lehman, the esports manager for New Mexico's Albuquerque Public Schools, visits La Cueva High School.

Published February 09, 2026

How This Leader Uses Gaming To Change Students' Lives

By Olina Banerji

At 75, Laurie Lehman is an unlikely champion for the buzzy and decidedly young world of esports.

Her knowledge of popular video games is vast. She's mastered gamers' insidious jargon: peripherals, shoutcasting, controllers, switchers.

Lehman isn't just a septuagenarian with an unusual affinity for what makes younger generations tick. She's a bona fide force to reckon with in the national esports landscape.

Over the last seven years, Lehman has built one of the most robust and well-funded esports programs in the country for the Albuquerque public school district.

She created the program from scratch, raising over \$120,000 in grants and sponsorships, including \$20,000 for students who went on to play competitive esports in college, and another \$20,000 for students who participated in state-level esports championships.

She's coaxed, cajoled, and collaborated with parents, principals, students, and dis-

trict bigwigs to take esports from a marginal after-school club activity to a full-blown curricular and career pathway for the district's students.

Esport clubs and classes within APS have also become inviting spaces for all students. Kids involved with esports are now more keen to attend school, feel more involved, and make and keep friendships more easily, according to district surveys.

APS has close to 45 esports clubs in its elementary, middle, and high schools, run by over 100 esports coaches. Lehman directed over \$160,000 additional school district dollars to fund these positions and to provide professional development for the educators who fill them.

"I love breaking the mold and breaking the rules and bringing esports as an ambassador," Lehman said. "I love it."

For most of the time Lehman spearheaded the program, the esports work came on top of a full-time gig as the district's budget and project supervisor.

"I would work all day for all these years, and then in any free time I got, or after I finished all my work, that's when I got this whole

program going," said Lehman.

In January 2026, Lehman passed on the budgeting job to a colleague so that she could concentrate solely on esports. She plans to help create unique career and technical education esports pathways in drone management and mass communication.

The esports program Lehman built from scratch rivals that of larger, better-resourced districts

By 2018, when Lehman started to build APS's esports program, the field had already exploded, as schools and colleges sought to tap into the multibillion-dollar gaming industry.

That trend has only continued to accelerate in recent years.

Over 300 universities in the United States now offer scholarships to talented esports players. And scholastic esports—gaming that embeds learning—can launch related careers in event management, cybersecurity, podcasting, and graphic design.

Lehman wanted a piece of that action for her roughly 65,000-student school district, New Mexico's largest. And she knew just the partner to tap: the Network of Academic and Scholastic Esports Federations, an international nonprofit that promotes the growth of scholastic esports in schools in the United States and abroad.

Esports "is the proverbial Trojan horse way to bring kids [in] and have them thrive and reach their potential," said Gerald Solomon, the founder and director of NASEF, which has helped establish over 3,500 high school esports programs across the country.

Lehman stands out among the hundreds of district leaders he's collaborated with, Solomon said.

"Innovation is a big part of who Laurie is and what she's built over the years," said Solomon, who began working with Lehman on the Albuquerque program about eight years ago.

Lehman leaned on NASEF's free esports curriculum to create one for APS, adapting it to New Mexico's standards.

"She took something that kids enjoy ... and turned it into something that was educational and also fun for the teachers to teach," Solomon said.

These days, the district's esports program, with its state-approved curriculum, multitude of clubs, multiple annual events, and funding from big-ticket sponsors like Microsoft and XFINITY, easily stands shoulder to shoulder with the opportunities offered at much larger, more prominent school including in Los

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Angeles, Miami, New York, or Nashville, Tenn., Solomon added.

“Her primary goal in the next few years is to have APS be a shining example to school districts around the United States and possibly around the world,” said Solomon.

From 100 students to 1,500: Why esports became a hub for every type of student

For Lehman, esports was never just about playing video games.

She envisioned esports clubs and classes as spaces that would welcome all types of students, regardless of their families’ income level or their own physical abilities.

Esports have lit up pathways for students who weren’t thinking about pursuing a college degree or technology-related careers, she said.

“At events, kids come up to me and ask, ‘What can you do with esports?’” said Lehman. She makes the connection for them, explaining that playing computer games can pave the way for college courses in computer technology.

That’s particularly exciting for kids who excel at gaming but are still trying to find their academic and social footing.

Participation in esports can pay dividends for student engagement

When Lehman started off in 2018, only a handful of students—about 100—from a few high schools played or showed interest in esports. That number has now swelled to over 1,500, according to Lehman.

At Del Norte High School, for instance, esports coach Marta Anderson said 25% of the school’s 1,000-plus population is now involved with esports as an after-school activity or study it as an elective.

Del Norte’s esports lab got a glow-up too: Back in 2018, the program began as five PCs shared among about half a dozen students in a closet-like room. Now, Anderson runs two labs with 27 gaming computers, a video production lab, a racing simulator, and a 3D printer.

“Laurie is amazing at finding the money,” said Anderson, who has worked with Lehman to build the esports footprint within the district.

Lehman’s efforts have put at least 90 gaming computers at 18 of the district’s high schools, Anderson added.

And Lehman is always on the hunt for more financial sponsors. Past funders have included marquee names like Microsoft—tapped for free computers—and the cable company XFINITY. Building and maintaining partnerships with these players to fuel esports’ expansion in APS is one of Lehman’s main goals.

The bigger win, in Anderson’s view: Eighty percent of Del Norte’s students involved with esports come to school every day, a bright spot in the post-pandemic, nationwide trend of chronically absent students. New Mexico’s chronic absenteeism rate—defined as missing more than 10% of school days in a year—peaked at 40% in the 2021-22 school year. That rate declined to 30% in the 2024-25 school year, which still means 1 in 3 New Mexico students missed more than 10% of school days.

Esports has become a conduit for a better connection between students and their schools. It’s also a friendly segue into extracurriculars for kids who don’t fit into the cliques or typical clubs middle and high schools offer, Lehman said.

Esports clubs and classes, at Del Norte and other high schools, give all students a “sense of belonging” that they may not have associated with schools before, said Lehman.

In a 2025 districtwide survey of over 1,100 APS students, about half said they felt “totally connected” to their schools after they started playing esports. Just 17% of those students felt such a strong connection before getting involved with the program.

“They make friends. They learn about sportsmanship. They start believing in themselves,” said Lehman.

Lehman has brought teachers into the esports fold

Lehman’s efforts have also persuaded more teachers like Anderson to coach esports. The middle and high schools have over 100 coaches put together.

These coaches—the majority of whom are also full-time teachers—run the after-school clubs, teach esports electives, and help students master social-emotional skills like teamwork and collaboration through gaming. Esports coaches receive a stipend of \$25 a hour for this work.

Institutionalizing esports hasn’t been an easy task. As the program expands, so do the challenges. A big one is money: Paying coaches may be a challenge in the new school year, as grant funding for stipends dwindles.

The school board, despite its overall support for the esports program, still hasn’t approved a budget for the program. Esports is on the superintendent’s radar, but dipping math and reading achievement demand more urgent attention.

Getting allies on board

In a previous life, Lehman was an anthropologist by training and a photographer by

profession. She was based in Santa Fe, but her travels took her all over the world—to the jungles of Panama, for instance, where she lived among the Kuna Indian tribe to complete her master’s thesis.

In 2011, the deteriorating health condition of a family member changed the course of Lehman’s career. She quit her freewheeling lifestyle to join the Santa Fe public school system. In 2018, she moved to APS, where she was tapped by Richard Bowman, the district’s technology director, to launch an esports program.

Bowman believed esports could be a secret weapon for student engagement. In Lehman, Bowman found a partner who shared his vision.

“It was a no-brainer. I’d seen how much kids get out of esports,” Lehman said, referencing her own sons who were gamers from an early age.

It was easy for her to slip into the role of an esports ambassador because, like her students, Lehman found the kind of close connections she craved in the esports community, both inside the district and beyond.

Esports also “opened up” something in Lehman, because it reminded her of what she had discovered about societal bonds as an anthropologist.

“When you study culture, you realize that pretty much all over the world, people are the same,” Lehman said. “We need to work together more to see all the similarities and how we can help each other. And so, I got into education. And when I got into esports, it was an easy progression.”

To make inroads with the district, Lehman and Bowman knew they had to change how others perceived esports.

For principals and parents—and crucially, district-level decision makers—esports conjured up images of lonely kids holed up in their basement, spending hours playing video games.

Eight years ago, when Lehman and Bowman went to the Albuquerque school board to talk about launching a districtwide esports program, they met stiff resistance. The board thought esports were “dangerous,” Lehman recalled.

Lehman combatted that perception through a mix of data and smart storytelling, Bowman said. In 2019, she produced an “esports annual report,” a pastiche of real-life stories and student quotes. It painted a picture of how gaming helped students connect with new friends and develop a sense of belonging, which encouraged them to attend school.

Those anecdotes were backed up by compelling data. Forty-one percent of participating students said esports improved their attendance. And 57% said esports helped them to “make and keep friends.”

“I got her in the room with the right people,” said Bowman, “but she wove the stories together.”

It worked: the board softened its stance against esports, clearing the way for the duo to invite more schools to launch esports clubs and classes.

Lehman then worked to convert other key players into allies. For instance, she created a detailed playbook that principals could use to convince parents that gaming could lead to a more engaging school life for their kids.

The club to career journey

A substantive part of Lehman’s vision was to turn esports into a curricular option, not just an engaging after-school activity. If gaming could create opportunities for college, or work post high-school, Lehman knew acceptance and funding would follow.

“In a club, you get the competition. You learn how to win. You learn how to lose. But in the classroom, you learn about careers, you learn about your potential, you learn about finding what you want to do,” said Lehman.

To facilitate that work, Lehman and Bowman created the New Mexico Scholastic Esports Federation, modeled on the international body NASEF.

That enabled them to bring interested educators, esports coaches, and curriculum experts together to create curriculum that could give students pathways to college courses ranging from cybersecurity to event management, all through esports.

The curriculum took shape in 2023 and was approved by the New Mexico Public Education Department. APS created its first esports class for high school students in the 2023-24 school year.

In its third year now, the esports elective is a popular one at Del Norte High School. Anderson, a former math teacher, has pivoted to teaching the elective, which seeks to build teamwork and collaboration.

Students review the history of esports—from its penny arcade beginnings to its current status as a booming multibillion-dollar industry. They also learn graphic design, build their own websites, and create original games and figure out how to market them.

The course concludes with an essay exam

that asks students to consider big picture questions about the industry.

Creating more champions

Members of Anderson’s original esports team are now graduating from college. Three former students are planning to pursue advanced degrees in cybersecurity or other STEM subjects.

Vy Nguyen, the first girl to join the esports club at Del Norte, recently graduated with a bachelor’s degree in management information systems from the University of New Mexico.

Nguyen’s path to college truly started from the closet-like esports lab at Del Norte, she said.

Nguyen moved to the United States from Vietnam at the age of 7. Her immigrant parents had set high expectations. Being a star League of Legends player wasn’t one of them.

“They didn’t want [esports to] impact my studies,” Nguyen said.

Nguyen, the only girl on a team of about half a dozen boys, played anyway, serving as team captain in interschool competitions.

She credits her participation in esports—both in high school and later in college—with helping her land her first internship, at a lab that was impressed by her passion for gaming.

Playing, and captaining, esports taught Nguyen to be patient and collaborate with others, even when she doesn’t agree with them.

Now, Nguyen is an important ally for Lehman, who invites her to talk to students and their parents about the career opportunities that esports can open.

Getting esports players the recognition other athletes receive

In 2023, Lehman sought to establish a “signing day” experience for esports athletes heading off to college. She wanted them to feel as recognized and celebrated as someone who’d won a football scholarship.

But the athletics departments at various district schools declined to let esports athletes join their existing ceremonies. So Lehman created one just for esports, giving each graduating player between \$500 to \$1,000, financed from donations and grants.

Now, even parents like Nguyen’s see the magic of esports.

“I graduated top of my class and I have an internship,” Nguyen said. “I think they realize that I play video games but can still do all this.” ■

Published February 09, 2026

‘Esports Are a Game-Changer’: How This Leader Got Buy-in for Student Gaming

By Olina Banerji

On a flight home around Thanksgiving, Laurie Lehman got to chatting with the couple sitting next to her. The esports manager for the Albuquerque public school district was off the clock.

But she quickly found herself deep in conversation with her neighbors about her passion for esports and the numerous doors gaming has opened for students in her district.

Lehman didn't intend to turn friendly strangers into potential donors. But her passion for her job, and the esports program she's built from scratch, shone through—even 30,000 feet off the ground.

“I showed them the data and I talked about how important esports is to students' lives,” Lehman told Education Week in an interview. She plans to meet the couple formally to discuss a potential sponsorship deal for the district's esports program.

Interactions like this are how Lehman has built one of the most robust and well-funded school-level esports programs in the country—by convincing the right people that “esports are a game-changer.”

She's partnered with national and international esports federations, persuaded parents and principals alike that esports isn't just “playing video games in a dark basement,” and turned local and national businesses into repeat sponsors.

The likes of XFINITY and Microsoft have donated computers and gaming equipment; Pepsi has sponsored snacks and drinks for the district's homegrown esports expo, and Lehman has applied for large and small grants to fund stipends for over 100 esports coaches.

In total, since 2018, Lehman has raised \$120,000 for the program, of which \$40,000 has gone toward funding mini-scholarships for college-bound students who played esports in high school and sport athletes who competed in state-level championships.

The money has also helped upgrade computer labs in every school in the district. High schools with esports clubs have their own gaming labs; middle and elementary schools have multipurpose labs that can be used for esports.



Laurie Lehman, the esports district manager for New Mexico's Albuquerque Public Schools, speaks with Tremayne Webb, an esports coordinator, at Del Norte High School.

Education Week spoke to Lehman about her journey from her first career in anthropology to esports manager and mentor to other esports enthusiasts across the world.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

You've built up an admirable program. What's immediately on your radar for the new school year?

With esports, funding is always a challenge.

One of our goals is to get the program funded by the district. It isn't right now.

We will have to defer to the superintendent wanting to bring up our math and reading scores. When you are at the bottom of the nation in math and reading, you are going to be superfocused on that. Our new superintendent has built all these goals and guardrails about what she wants to achieve. She does support us, but they can't fund us right now with all the focus on math and reading. One of her goals is centered around social-emotional learning, and that's what esports is aligned to. Even if we got \$100,000 every year from the district, it would be great. But we need more than that, to pay for my salary and for the tech

guys who work with me to keep our gaming software updated.

We've also been trying get the New Mexico legislature to push for an esports day for the state. It's another way to recognize that esports can be a viable program that helps kids.

By your own estimate, now, over 1,500 APS students are now involved with esports. How did you make sure that program is attractive to a wide range of students?

We believe in an inclusive environment. We believe in a no-cuts program in schools [where every kid gets to stay on the team, regardless of their gaming ability]. Of course, you can have your A-team competing in state finals. There's nothing wrong with that.

And you have students on the B team trying to move up to learn.

But some kids want to join esports, not because they want to be on the A team. They want to make friends. They might want to get into shout casting, which is like in football, someone talks about the game as it's going on.

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We have kids involved in creating videos for social media.

How are you turning esports into a viable career pathway?

There are quite a few courses that would relate to an esports CTE track. But they're listed under digital technology because that's the way they began years ago. So right now, there are tracks to data science, information technology, cybersecurity, computer science, physical computing. We want to add more CTE pipelines that are esports-specific.

We met with the district's CTE director over the summer. The first big course we want to work on is drones and drone training. That would be cool because students could use that in the job market right away after high school. We're talking to [the CTE director] about how we can get some money to get that going. At the end of the course, you have to take a test to show what you learned. It would be over \$1,500 per student. We don't have that kind of money. We want to have that kind of money, but right now, we don't.

Your own journey took you from anthropology to esports. How did that happen?

My love of anthropology took me around the world. I traveled and worked for a bunch of magazines with my ex-husband. When you study culture, you realize that pretty much all over the world, people are the same. We all have hopes and dreams and we all care about our families. And you might be living in the jungle in Panama or in New Guinea and you [can] see these people are not that different. It makes me believe that we need to work together more to see how we can help each other. And so, I got into education. And when I got into esports, it was an easy progression.

Esports opened up something to me. They gave me a sense of belonging. They gave me purpose, and every day, I am excited to think about what I can do to help these students and coaches. It's pretty amazing to find something like that later in your life. ■

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Published January 26, 2026

One District's Battle to Curb Cellphones And Get Kids to Engage in Real Life

By Alyson Klein

Spokane, Wash.—

In a high school cafeteria here on a recent snowy afternoon, a 10-foot stone giant backed by magical warriors fended off a goblin army. Nearby, a Bloodsport-inspired tournament featuring sentient trees was underway.

These imaginary battles—waged by students in Joel E. Ferris High School's wildly popular Dungeons & Dragons club—are part of the Spokane school district's real-life war against a foe many educators consider more insidious than any villain the role-playing game can conjure up: cellphone dependency.

Spokane, along with scores of districts nationwide, banned cellphones in middle and elementary schools at the beginning of the 2024-25 school year. High schoolers must keep their phones away during class but are permitted to use them at lunch and at passing times.

Such bans are increasingly commonplace. At least 33 states and the District of Columbia require districts to place restrictions on cellphones during the school day, although research on whether banning cellphones contributes to better academic outcomes—or

more improved social skills—is still emerging.

Typically, districts simply prohibit the devices that educators see as distracting students from learning and engaging with their peers and teachers.

Spokane's leaders went further.

They created or expanded scores of clubs, sports teams, and other extracurricular activities so students could redirect the time and attention they once devoted to doomscrolling to activities in real life (or IRL, in digital parlance).

The strategy, made possible in part by a three-year, \$3.4 million donation from a local nonprofit organization, has resulted in a nearly eightfold increase in school-sponsored activities and extracurriculars across all grade levels.

Student engagement—as measured by participation in at least one activity—shot up more than 30 percentage points between the 2022-23 school year and the 2024-25 school year, the first year the program was in effect. These involved students are less likely to be chronically absent and pass their classes than students who don't participate in extracurriculars, according to district data.

The goal is to give students “a sense of belonging” to a world outside their device's

6-inch screen, Adam Swinyard, the district's superintendent, said in a wide-ranging interview last month.

“This is not just about, an iPhone is distracting you from your science textbook. This is bigger than that,” Swinyard said. “We want them to grow into adults that value in-person relationships and connections. Not that there isn't value in what an online experience can provide, but that should be a complement—not the core of the way in which a kid or a person is moving through the world.”

To be sure, Swinyard and other district leaders readily acknowledge it will take more than girls' wrestling and multicultural clubs to curb cellphone addiction.

And some teachers are unhappy that the rapid expansion of extracurriculars—which cost the roughly 29,000-student district more than \$1.1 million over the past two years, on top of the grant—diverts resources that could be funneled to more traditional support for teaching and learning.

Do students think it's working? The answer, from Rylin Frasca-Roberts, a shaggy-haired Ferris junior in the D&D club: a grudging, qualified yes.

“My freshman year, my sophomore year, whenever I would be done with school, I would just go on the bus, go back home, do homework, and then rot away on my phone,” Rylin said.

“Now, well, I still do that Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays,” he deadpanned. “But on club days, I'm here. I'm playing games and I'm being social, which is something that freshman-year me would have abhorred.”

But Teddy Osborne, a senior who carried his phone around at lunch the following day, had a typical teenage response to educators telling him to get offline and get involved: “Being forced to do it makes us want to do it less, to be honest,” said Teddy, an honors student who embraced band and sports before the initiative began.

Spokane strives to create an activity for every type of student

The district had 130 unique, district-sponsored activities in the 2022-23 school year, the year before this initiative began. That soared to 1,024 this school year and counting.

The offerings go well beyond the typical National Honors Society and drama club. The district strives to create a varied and enticing enough smorgasbord of activities so that every student in its 58 schools can find their place.

There are cooking clubs for aspiring chefs.

Knitting clubs for the crafty. Community service clubs for do-gooders. One middle school offers a welding club.

The district responds to student requests, establishing a Bible club at Glover Middle School when kids expressed interest, for instance.

There's also been a boom in what the district calls "subvarsity" sports, essentially club teams for students who want to play but may not have the time or athletic talent to be on the official varsity team.

The Dungeons & Dragons club is home to plenty of kids who, like Rylin, proudly admit they aren't natural joiners.

"You want to be a nerd in an environment full of a lot of other nerds?" Rylin said proudly. "Come to the nerd club. This is the nerd club!"

To facilitate all this, the district has employees who serve as "engagement navigators"—one for each of its five feeder patterns. They fill a unique position akin to a combination concierge, coach, and social worker.

The navigators make sure all students understand the district's extracurricular offerings, ensure high-interest clubs get off the ground, and help find arrangements for students who may want to join an activity but lack transportation.

Principal sees nixing phones and upping extracurriculars as going on 'offense'

Some students can't stay after school because they take care of a younger sibling or work to support their families.

Others have transportation challenges that the engagement navigators, extra buses devoted to after-school programs, and the district's coordination with the city transit system haven't been able to work around.

So, in some schools, the push to help students explore IRL interests has become part of the school day.

Ferris, for instance, offers clubs during lunch, including an angler's club for fishing fans and pickup basketball.

Glover Middle School hosts lunchtime tennis and bowling tournaments. Students can also play board games, ping pong, or old-school video games like Frogger and Donkey Kong.

"If they're gonna play a video game, I always tell the kids, it has to be from when I was a kid," said Michael Stark, the school's principal.

Glover has also turned its morning advisory period over to clubs. Students can do arts and crafts, play volleyball or indoor basketball, or sing karaoke with Stark.

That's helped whet kids' appetites for activ-

ities, enticing some to join after-school clubs that they may not have otherwise considered, Stark said.

Stark expected the shift from cellphones to be "structural," he said. Instead, it's been "cultural."

"Before we had this laser-like focus on getting kids off their stupid devices and giving them more real-world things to do, we spent all day long playing defense," Stark said. "We were finding out about these fights that happened through social media. We were doing lots of behavior monitoring after the fact."

With the cellphone ban—which is strict in middle schools, where students can't even use their phones during lunch—and the explosion of extracurriculars, the district is "on offense," he said.

At Glover, activities became so popular that they strained the school's budget. Stark estimates the school paid about \$20,000 in additional money last school year to run the clubs, including stipends of \$28 an hour for teachers who work overtime to lead the activities.

"We grossly underestimated the amount of kids that were going to be interested," Stark said. "I can't think of a better problem to have."

To cover the extra costs, the school made cuts to photocopying and other "stuff that doesn't make a difference for kids," he added.

Community partners are key to the activity expansion

To help fuel this extracurricular explosion, the district's list of community partnerships shot up to 35 organizations, from six before the initiative began.

Many of these partners, such as Spokane Pickleball, a nonprofit that aims to expand the sport in the city, and Inland Chess, a local chess organization, provide support and resources for clubs.

The district has also reached out to the community for in-kind donations and other resources. In some cases, the response has been overwhelming: Several schools got so much donated yarn for their knitting clubs—a popular extracurricular option—that they had to devise a system for keeping track of it.

Perhaps the most important partnership, however, remains with LaunchNW, the local nonprofit organization that provided the roughly three-year grant to start the initiative.

That funding covers the salaries of both the district's five engagement navigators, and another half dozen navigators centered at organizations around the community. Those community-based navigators help support ac-

tivities for students in Spokane public schools, even though they aren't employed by the district itself.

For instance, through Manzanita House Spokane, a local organization that works with refugee families, high schoolers from several schools have formed a cricket club that now competes against kids in other cities.

Cricket, a bat-and-ball sport that shares some DNA with baseball, isn't prominent in the United States. But it's popular in some of the students' countries of origin, including Afghanistan and India.

"These kids generally would not have been engaged in after-school activities, because it isn't in their wheelhouse," said Ben Small, the executive director of LaunchNW and a former superintendent of the nearby Central Valley school district.

LaunchNW also developed a one-stop-shop portal to help parents register their children for activities, including those offered by community organizations that aren't affiliated with the district.

Students who participate in extracurricular activities have better grades and attendance

While that platform will remain available even after the grant largely wraps up in the 2026-2027 school year, it's unclear how Spokane will continue major parts of the Engage IRL initiative without this outside financing. Small said his organization is committed to helping the district pinpoint sustainable funding sources.

Still, even now, finding money and resources for an ever-blooming menu of clubs and sports teams remains a hurdle, school leaders say.

"Finances have been a challenge, as we add more clubs," said Ivan Corley, the principal of Lewis and Clark High School. "We're struggling at times figuring out how to help teachers continue something that kids are enjoying."

Money isn't the only limited resource. At some schools, it's often the same few teachers volunteering to lead clubs.

What's more, the \$28 an hour stipend given to teachers for the time they spend running a club doesn't extend to the hours devoted to planning activities or finding resources, such as calling around to local ethnic restaurants for in-kind food donations to a multicultural club.

Swinyard also knows teachers have raised concerns about money spent on clubs at a time when the district's budget is tight.

"We know what the research says about classroom instruction and we're diverting resources to extracurricular," Swinyard ac-

knowledgeed.

The district still invests in more traditional strategies to improve teaching and learning, including an emphasis on professional learning communities, he said. But in his mind, steering resources to extracurriculars is “one of, if not the most important thing we can do right now,” Swinyard said.

“We can have the best curriculum and instruction, we can have the best classroom programs available, but if kids are not engaged, if they’re not coming to school, or if they’re coming to school and not feeling a connection and a desire to participate, it doesn’t matter how good instruction is.”

Swinyard noted that disciplinary infractions are down since the launch of both the cellphone ban and the Engage IRL initiative—and not just for behavior problems tied to cellphones.

About 20% of students who participate in athletics or activities were chronically absent this school year, compared with 34% of unengaged students.

Academic achievement is also higher among kids who participate in extracurriculars. Last school year, 10.6% more high school students who engaged in at least one activity passed all their classes compared with those who did not participate.

Cellphones are a ‘formidable adversary’ for educators, superintendent says

Teachers—and especially students—are quick to point out that some teachers are a lot stricter than others in enforcing the no-phones rule.

“People are still on their phones under their desks, and the teachers notice, but they don’t really care much as long as people are getting their work done,” said Teddy, the Ferris High junior.

School leaders know students are getting around the rules. But at minimum, the no-phone policy is a stumbling block to constant digital communication, said Heidi Hayes, Glover’s assistant principal.

“They keep their phones away for the most part,” Hayes said. “They sneak them into the bathroom and text sometimes, but it’s less immediate for them.”

Swinyard didn’t expect the initiative to suddenly silence the siren song of cellphones, which he described as the “most formidable adversary competing for the attention of kids that we have ever faced.”

And the district isn’t particularly punitive

when students break the rules and check their phone in class.

The first time that happens, teachers will give them a warning. The second time, they’ll have their phone taken away for the rest of the day. When students violate the rules habitually—say, for 10 days in a row—school leaders may get parents involved, but that happens rarely, Swinyard said.

“It’s not a power struggle,” he said. “We’ve tried to keep it away from discipline and center it on, ‘that’s not good for you, and it is not healthy for you to be staring at that thing nonstop.’”

Still, it’s an open question whether Spokane’s strategy actually leads to less time on screens once students return home, one expert noted.

Increasing extracurriculars to get kids off their devices is a “really amazing thing to do,” said Merve Lapus, the vice president for education outreach and partnerships at Common Sense Media, a nonprofit that studies the connection between youth and technology.

But he’s not sure if participating in a club or activity will necessarily have any lasting impact on students’ digital habits.

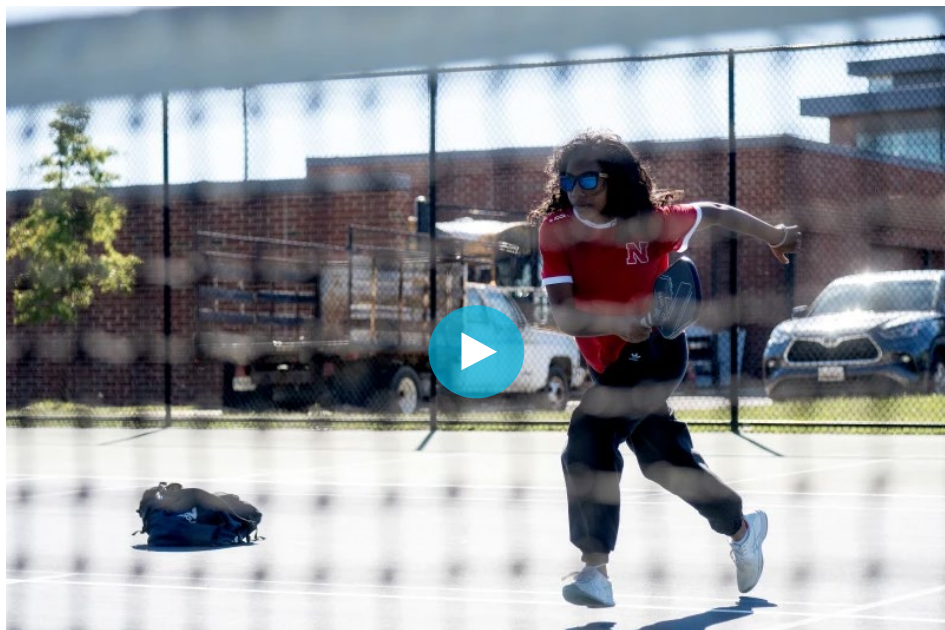
Has the extracurricular experience “taught [students] anything about why they shouldn’t be on their phone?” Lapus wondered. “Maybe not. [Maybe] it’s just a delay, right?”

But in school, as students look away from screens and engage with their peers in person, the hallways and cafeterias are noisier.

“I guess it felt a little bit more controlled,” back when kids were on their phones, said Stark, the Glover principal, as he ran karaoke club during advisory period.

He paused, listening as kids belted out standards like Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believin’” and Christmas carols, to raucous applause.

Then he added, “I don’t mind the noise. It’s the sound of being a 14-year-old.” ■



Jaclyn Borowski/Education Week



VIDEO: How One District Made Pickleball
An Inclusive Varsity Sport

Published October 31, 2025

How One District Made Pickleball An Inclusive Varsity Sport

By Jaclyn Borowski & Yi-Jo Shen

In Maryland's Montgomery County school district, "corollary sports" are an opportunity for students with disabilities to play a school sport alongside their peers. The sports, which include bocce and "allied softball," offer an opportunity for all student-athletes to learn and grow in their own ways while being part of a varsity team.

The district recently added pickleball to their corollary sports offerings, selecting it because of its broad popularity, the opportunity it presents as a lifelong activity, and because of the ease of building teams, where boys and girls play together and each pairing consists of one student with disabilities, and one without.

At Wheaton High School in Montgomery County, students on the pickleball team work together to set up the courts, warm up for matches, and support each other, celebrating their individual and collective wins.

For pickleball head coach Stacy Azizirad,

that's what it's all about.

"It's really getting them to feel like they belong and they're a part of something," she said. ■

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Published by Editorial Projects
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