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# Extra-curricula activities: When extra equals more



Most UK schools are in session for about 190 days a year and the traditional school day runs from 8.30am to 3.30pm, often with short breaks and lunchtimes. Learning doesn't only or always happen during those hours, and new skills develop outside the classroom as well as within it, whether the teacher is present or not.

Normally the curriculum is the body of knowledge, understanding and skills that has been externally decreed that the students need to learn to 'succeed', but we know that learning is much more than this. Successful schools provide what are known as enrichment or co-curricula activities where students step outside the routine curriculum to gain new experiences and opportunities. This can include attending workshops and making visits to museums, theatres and galleries; listening to visiting speakers; travelling within the UK and overseas; being immersed in languages and the sciences; working with charities, businesses and with entrepreneurs; and being

involved in competition and in self-generated areas of interest. In many ways this can be the most exciting part of school and memories of these kinds of activities stay with us forever.

Extra-curricula is normally understood to mean after-school activities and there are several reasons why they take place:

- The school day isn't long enough to fit everything in that we value. Sports practices, music rehearsals, drama productions and homework support can all spill over into extra time. Students can also have the opportunity to try something totally new and not normally available like Mandarin, debating, filmmaking, coding and robotics, story telling, dance, fitness etc. Often they have the chance to work with different groups of students and of different ages, sharing the same interests.
- Many teachers are enthusiastic about their own interests and knowledge and

they demonstrate, coach and mentor so that students might share in the pleasure and excitement, as well as hopefully acquire new skills. Students too have passions to share and can often lead extra curricula activities with a teacher or adult volunteer on hand. This is a great way to build self-confidence and to provide activities that appeal to groups of young people.

- The school day just isn't long enough to suit the needs of working parents and so the school day is stretched, sometimes to 6pm to provide what could be described as some kind of child-minding service. Many schools even offer what is termed 'wrap-around care', which can begin as early as 7.30am with breakfast provided and go through to early evening.

In my own school we talk about the spark of genius that we want to discover in students and encourage. Extra-curricula activities can often reveal and showcase that



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spark and provide a platform for extraordinary successes that go way beyond a student’s school life. For example, we have had a small group of eight-year-olds who created their own charity that provides fruit to poor children in India, while our musicians collaborated in a concert at Carnegie Hall in New York. Our student-led fundraising efforts have supported house-building projects in Cambodia, as well as the refugee crises in Syria and in Calais; they have helped to rebuild communities after the Japanese tsunami and fought against inequality and the lack of freedoms with Amnesty International. We have hugely talented digital photographers and filmmakers who wrote, directed, edited and presented their own short films and even got to visit the Hollywood studios. There are numerous residential camps for field-studies, history, languages, geography, writers’ workshops, ski trips and much more.

Extra-curricula activities are often undertaken in mixed age groups so that students have the chance to collaborate with a dif-

ferent range of children in activities led by teachers who may not normally teach them. It is also often a time when the teacher can be a little more relaxed and can lead an activity that he or she is passionate about, particularly those creative and innovative activities with which the teacher can join in. Sometimes students lead the best extra-curricula activities, giving them a chance to share their skills and interests. Parents too have a wide range of skills that they often offer to share with the school community. All of this creates a richness that becomes part of the school’s character.

Sometimes schools bring in outside groups to run extra-curricula programmes and parents are charged a small additional fee. This can be an effective way of accessing experts who really understand how to relate to young people and they can often create that ‘wow’ factor. These could include magicians or a ‘mad-science’ group; the insect, small animal or reptile expert; judo, taekwondo and karate instructors; sports coaches, golf professionals and

dance instructors; actors/poets, painters, musicians and authors. The list is endless!

Although technology can play a part in extra-curricula activities, the time can also be used to think about traditional pursuits that get children away from computer screens. That can include things like baking, sewing and knitting, construction, learning playground games and getting outside. One of the most popular activities in my own school is the week-long back to nature Bushcraft camp where students learn to thrive in the natural environment without normal luxuries, acquiring the skills and resilience to do so.

Developing the soft skills of teamwork and leadership, encouraging individual research, sharing interests and successes, and allowing personal passions to flourish are often more evident through extra-curricula activities than in the traditional classroom setting. To encourage deeper investment in extra-curricula activities, we should consider:



- Adjusting and lengthening the school day and school year so that there is time for more than just narrow, routine learning.
- Reviewing what we consider to be valuable in education and in the development of young people by allowing more creativity and innovation to take place during the normal school day.

Unfortunately, the pressures of league tables, homework, tutoring and test taking may continue to prevail in the short term, but we should not forget to build in time for fun! For some, the opportunity to learn outside the curriculum may be missed, and that rare spark may go unnoticed, but for many extra curricula can be the exciting catalyst that leads to unexpected success.

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David Rose is the Director of Dwight School London. For more information please visit [www.dwightlondon.org](http://www.dwightlondon.org).



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