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Electives Getting the Boot? It Depends on Where and What

By Sean Cavanagh

Backers of time-honored electives ranging from band to consumer sciences fear they are being crowded out of the school day as districts, facing tougher state and federal requirements, devote more time and money to core academic subjects.

"It's narrowing the focus of schools and forcing a number of subjects to the sideline," said Bob Morrison, the chairman of the Music for All Foundation, a nationwide advocacy organization. Mr. Morrison calls the combination of academic and financial pressures on districts "a double-edged sword."



Junior Daniel Poole, center, a Hurricane Katrina evacuee, stretches with classmates during an elective dance class at Hastings High School in the Alief Independent School District in Houston.

—File photo by David J. Phillip/AP

Electives' place during the school day has periodically been squeezed since the current movement for standards-based improvement began in the late 1980s. Those demands ratcheted up again with passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. Although most of the testing mandated by the federal law is at the elementary and middle school levels, students are assessed at least once in mathematics and reading during their high school careers.

But it is the increasingly tough state high school graduation requirements that have made it especially difficult for schools to make time for electives, supporters of such classes say. Districts' desire to add more college-prep courses, such as Advanced Placement, has further chipped away at that time, they contend.

Few administrators would question the need for a heavy emphasis on core academics. But many are also convinced of electives' immeasurable benefits, such as allowing students to discover a new talent, pursue it in depth—and have fun doing it.

"It's the extracurriculars that bring life and soul to the school," said Kenneth M. Arndt, the superintendent of Community Unit School District 300 in Illinois. His district narrowly avoided having to cut a wide array of electives and extracurricular activities, after a successful ballot measure last month provided his schools with more money.

“Having them promotes a healthy environment,” Mr. Arndt added. “Once a program is eliminated, it’s very difficult to bring back.”

Defining Electives

Even though advocates for electives believe more districts are cutting those classes, they also acknowledge that little firm evidence exists of how often popular electives are being cut, or which subjects are suffering the most.

SEE ALSO

Read the related story, [“Film Credits.”](#)

At the same time, educators see signs of an upswing in some course options such as filmmaking.

The lack of knowledge about the state of electives is partly because of the amorphous nature of that category. States and districts vary enormously in the courses they list as required or optional. In one state, for instance, world history might be a graduation requirement, while in another, it’s an elective. One district might require students to take an art course to earn their diplomas; in others, art is optional.

Mr. Morrison’s Warren, N.J.-based music foundation is conducting a study of the condition of school arts programs in that state. Similar surveys either have been conducted or are under way in other states. But reliable nationwide research on electives is scarce.

“Line 10 people against the wall and ask them to define what core subjects are—you get 10 different answers,” Mr. Morrison said.

A 2004 survey by the now-defunct Council for Basic Education found that elementary and secondary principals in four states reported varying levels of declines in liberal arts classes over the four previous years, particularly in districts serving large numbers of minority students. That study, however, did not distinguish between electives and mandatory courses. ([“Principals’ Poll Shows Erosion Of Liberal Arts Curriculum,”](#) March 17, 2004.)

Like many observers, Claus von Zastrow, the report’s primary author, believes that increasingly, the survivability of electives depends on their inclusion in a subject covered by mandatory state tests.

“Given the pattern we saw, things that were not being tested were most likely to be jettisoned,” he said.

Larry Cuban, a professor emeritus of education at Stanford University, says the push to cut electives in favor of core academics has come in waves.

The Soviet Union’s 1957 launch of the Sputnik satellite led to a call for more math and science education in U.S. high schools, often at the expense of elective courses. Similarly, the publication of the federally commissioned report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 led to more-formalized academic standards and curricula, and some optional courses were pared from the school day again, he said.

Today, high schools often feel pressure not only from parents who want typical “fun” electives retained, he speculated, but also from those who demand more college-prep options, such as AP classes, on the menu. Advocates of increasing academic demands appear to be winning out in many cases, Mr. Cuban said.

"There's been a constant search for balance at comprehensive high schools between developing the whole person and making sure that they are literate after receiving a high school diploma," said Mr. Cuban, who has studied the history of curriculum.

Getting Through the Day

Elective classes have long been prime targets for budget cuts, particularly when the emphasis on core academic subjects increases, administrators say. Many districts have turned electives that were once offered for credit during the school day into extracurricular activities held before or after school.

Officials in Community Unit School District 300, northwest of Chicago, successfully staved off cuts to electives when voters narrowly approved what Mr. Arndt, the superintendent, described as a "Hail Mary" referendum. The measure will bring an estimated \$8 million more per year to the 19,000-student district's budget, currently \$140 million, he said.

Students launched a grassroots campaign to keep electives and extracurriculars. One such activist was Matt Bishop, 16, who takes part in numerous music programs, including a wind ensemble and choir.

The sophomore said he would have considered transferring from the district if those classes had been lost. Few college music programs, he reasoned, would have been impressed by a student with only two years of music study on his transcript.

In campaigning for the referendum door to door, the student also reminded voters that electives were the courses that got many students through the school day.

"What was your favorite thing during high school?" Mr. Bishop recalled asking adults. "They'd tell me, and we'd say, 'That'll be gone. Do you really want that to happen?'"

Still, wholesale cuts to elective art and music programs are more rare today than in years past, in part because of strong lobbying from parents and students, according to Michael J. Blakeslee, the deputy executive director of the National Association for Music Education, in Reston, Va.

But he believes a less obvious threat has emerged. Schools trim time devoted to music in the early grades, replacing it with core academic subjects. Student interest and enrollment in the upper grade levels wane as a result, leaving those programs vulnerable to cuts, Mr. Blakeslee said.

"You end up with a course that's a hollow shell," he said.

A report by the Washington-based Center on Education Policy, released last month, cited districts that said they were scaling back optional courses to devote more time to reading and math to satisfy federal testing mandates. ("**Study: NCLB Leads to Cuts for Some Subjects**," April 5, 2006.)

Among them was the Bayonne, N.J., district, in which administrators moved a number of elementary and middle school elective arts and music classes to before- and after-school activities, to allow room for core academic courses.

At first, student interest in those out-of-school programs declined noticeably, but the numbers have since rebounded, said Joan Rosen, the district's art and music director. The 9,200-student school system still offers elementary and middle school students one art and one music course during the school week.

Critics have warned that moving courses after school can discourage poor children and those with limited transportation options from participating. That problem has not occurred in Bayonne, partly because many students can walk to school, Ms. Rosen said. Since making the change, she said, she senses a stronger commitment among students taking part in the after-school classes, possibly because of the extra time it requires of them.

"It makes it more meaningful," Ms. Rosen said.

Talk of Demise Premature

But others worry that districts with fewer resources than Bayonne will be less likely to maintain electives, particularly if they are scrambling under federal mandates to improve math and reading scores.

"In the end, we want to have all students have the richest content possible, rather than just having one group receiving an emphasis on basic skills," said Mr. von Zastrow, now the executive director of the Learning First Alliance, a Washington-based coalition of public school advocates that includes teachers' unions, school administrators, and parents.

Some advocacy groups, meanwhile, are encouraging schools to reshape electives to give them more value in the face of increasing state academic requirements.

In response to cuts to vocational education programs, the Association for Career and Technical Education, in Alexandria, Va., is encouraging schools to establish plans so that vocational and core academic classes are woven together throughout students' high school course schedules, said Alisha D. Hyslop, the group's assistant director of public policy.

Other advocates for electives say that talk of their demise is premature.

The National Art Education Association, an organization in Reston, Va., that advocates for the visual arts, has been collecting information on how the number of instructors in that area has changed since 2000. Of 33 states queried, 18 said the number of full-time visual arts instructors in their schools has risen during that time, while only 14 reported a decrease, and one remained level, said Larry Peeno, the organization's deputy executive director.

State graduation requirements for the arts have also increased in the past 15 years, he noted.

"We've been the stepchild of public education," Mr. Peeno said. But when it comes to worries about a major drop in arts electives, he added: "As a national trend, I don't see it."

The perception is that "any time the budget gets tight, the arts get cut," Mr. Peeno said. "But it's not a given."

Coverage of new schooling arrangements and classroom improvement efforts is supported by a grant from the Annenberg Foundation.

PHOTO: Junior Daniel Poole, center, a Hurricane Katrina evacuee, stretches with classmates during an elective dance class at Hastings High School in the Alief Independent School District in Houston.

—File photo by David J. Phillip/AP

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

["Study: NCLB Leads to Cuts for Some Subjects,"](#) April 5, 2006.

["D.C. Schools Chief Plans to Expand Art, Music Offerings,"](#) May 18, 2005.

["Social Studies Losing Out to Reading, Math,"](#) March 16, 2005.

"Miami District to Study H.S. Courses With Eye to Addressing Inequities," February 9, 2005.

"Academic Atrophy," April 7, 2004.

"Principals' Poll Shows Erosion Of Liberal Arts Curriculum," March 17, 2004.

"Arts, Foreign Languages Getting Edged Out," November 5, 2003.

"History Invading Social Studies' Turf in Schools," January 22, 2003.

For background, previous stories, and Web links, read **No Child Left Behind**.

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

The report, **"From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 4 of the No Child Left Behind Act,"** from the **Center on Education Policy**, found that many schools are cutting back on subjects such as social studies, music, and art to make more time for reading and mathematics, the main subjects tested by the federal education law.

Read the report, **"No Subject Left Behind: A Guide to Arts Education Opportunities in the 2001**

NCLB Act," posted by the **National Association for Music Education**. 