

Insights, News & Events

CLUB DREAD? HOW INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS CAN MANAGE CLUBS AND EXTRACURRICULARS WITH MINIMAL LEGAL EXPOSURE (AND HEARTACHE)

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All K-12 school leaders understand that having a strong extracurricular program is almost as important as maintaining exceptional academic programs. Colleges expect high school students to excel outside the classroom, and those same students expect that their high schools will make extracurricular activities available to them.

But maintaining a strong club program can be difficult. Getting support from parents can sometimes be problematic (and other times, parents can become *too* invested in what is happening on the field or in the gym). As much as they are committed to the kids and club activities, overworked teachers serving as club advisors can find it difficult to remain focused on these kinds of activities after school hours. And sometimes the existence of the clubs themselves can become a political football.

Independent school administrators would be wise to keep in mind the following seven-point plan when assessing issues relating to clubs and extracurricular activities.

1. **Quality, Not Quantity.** Resist the temptation to have dozens of clubs, many with only a handful of members. While it might feel good to tout to prospective students that your school has more clubs than “Academy X” down the street at Open House, remember that each of those clubs will require faculty supervision and parent support.

If one of your students approaches the school to plead for a “Leprechaun Club” celebrating all things Irish, ask yourself: (1) Will enough students be interested to make

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the club worthwhile? (2) Does the subject matter of the club contribute to the core mission of the school? (3) Is there already a club that focuses on a similar subject matter, or can the proposed club be folded into an existing club? (4) Do you have a faculty or staff member that shares a passion for the subject matter?

2. Topical, But Controversial? Today's high school students enjoy the idea of getting together with like-minded peers to discuss current events or other political issues about which they feel passionate. Their views on these issues are not always the same as their parents or school administrators. It is one thing to establish a "Free Speech Alley" where students can practice debate skills and learn how to express their opinions on political topics with civility. It is quite another to have a club exclusively dedicated to supporting the hot-button topics.

For example, students wishing to establish an LGBTQ club might be encouraged to join forces with an existing Diversity and Inclusion club. The more "narrow-focus" clubs that are permitted, the harder it is for the school to say "no" without appearing to favor one student's opinion over the other. And schools should not hesitate to gently explain to students why certain clubs are simply incompatible with the school's mission, especially if the subject matter is wholly inconsistent with tenets of faith associated with the institution.

3. Get Covered. Check with your insurance broker to make sure all club activities will be covered by the school's general liability policy. And even if there is coverage, it's not a particularly good idea to permit activities that are inherently risky. There are degrees of risk, of course, and a rock climbing club, while potentially dangerous, can be made relatively safe by adhering to proper techniques under the tutelage of an experienced coach or mentor. (The Sword Swallowing Club? Not so much.) Make sure participating students and parents sign appropriate permission forms, making sure they include appropriate waiver and release language.

4. Light Is The Best Disinfectant. Because they usually meet before or after school when fewer people are around, the opportunities for inappropriate adult-student

interaction is greater in club and extracurricular activities than in the typical academic setting. Ensure that sufficient chaperones are available for all club activities and that meetings occur in predictable locations and, to the extent possible, locations with high visibility. Advisors and parent volunteers should receive mandatory training on adult-student boundaries.

5. Define Expectations Of Club Leaders And Advisors.

Some club advisors take a “hands-off” approach to overseeing club activities, preferring to allow students to take the lead in managing the club. While there is nothing inherently wrong with this (indeed, it can develop leadership skills in students), it can lead to an “advisor *in absentio*” situation.

It goes without saying that adult supervision of club activities is necessary both for risk management as well as education and cultural enhancement. Before a faculty member is permitted to take on a club, develop a game plan for meeting frequency, activities, field trips, etc., at the beginning of the school year. Those expectations can be relayed to parents and students, and expectations for their participation can be spelled out as well.

6. Consider A Maximum. There’s an Andy Applicant in every school, convinced that his chances of gaining admission to Exclusive U. is directly related to the number of clubs and extracurricular activities he can list on his resume. To combat this problem, some schools place a numerical limit on the number of clubs a student can participate in each semester. Alternatively, advisors can boot kids who have signed up for clubs but never participate.

In such cases, opportunistic students can be deterred from joining clubs by letting them know that transcripts will reflect “removal” from a club because of “failure to participate.” That usually causes the “joiners” to stay home, while the true “participators” are happier being in a group of other kids who share their passion for the club’s activity.

7. Have Fun! Clubs can be a break from the academic grind and create more well-rounded students. No kid looking to enjoy themselves by participating in an extracurricular

activity should be faced with bullying and other confrontational behavior. Make clear from the outset that school rules prohibiting bullying will be enforced in the club setting as rigorously in the classroom.

So never fear! With the proper approach, clubs are not something to dread. They can be an integral part of a student's experience and make your school a more complete place for nurturing the well-rounded young adult.

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