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TOP STORY

## Beyond the classroom: Schools offer varied menu of activities to students

By Paul Pattera newsroom@heraldstandard.com  
Oct 7, 2023

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Courtesy of Mike DeFazio  
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From painting with senior citizens to learning Mandarin Chinese to operating coffee shops, today's students are engaging in a myriad of extracurricular activities.

School districts are finding different ways to give students avenues to pursue various interests while possibly charting a path for their future.

Dr. Laura Jacob, superintendent of the California Area School District, is a big proponent of extracurricular activities. In fact, the district's website lists about four pages' worth of options for students.

“These activities cultivate critical attributes like time management, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving skills,” she said. “Moreover, they stimulate creativity, foster a sense of belonging, and instill self-confidence, all of which positively impact academic performance. Students who participate in extracurriculars often exhibit improved discipline, motivation, and a deeper connection to their school, ultimately leading to heightened academic success and an enriched educational experience.”

One of those activities — for students in kindergarten through sixth grade — is CRUSH It!, short for California Raises Up Student Health.

“Myself, our school psychologist and various teachers volunteer to run the club two days per week for a six-week period each fall and spring,” said Rachel Nagy, elementary principal. “We begin each session with a mini social emotional lesson, practice various stretches and complete a HIIT (High Intensity Interval Training) workout before cooling down with guided yoga stretches.”

Among other diverse district offerings are the Bee Club, Violin Club, 3-D Printing Club and Mandarin Chinese, which involves learning about the Chinese language and culture.

Collaborative pursuits involving the community, such as a new arts initiative in the Laurel Highlands School District, are also being met with success.

Art & Aging: Seniors, Students and Synergy is being offered to high school students through the Rural Arts Collaborative, the Hillman Foundation and the Fayette County Cultural Trust. Each week, high school art teacher Mike DeFazio and 12 students travel to Monarch Meadow Personal Care Home in Uniontown to work in various art forms.

“A variety of works will be created throughout the year, some individual projects, and a larger group mural,” DeFazio said. “All of the projects will involve collaboration between the L-H art students and residents of Monarch Meadows. We are very early in the implementation process, but students and residents are excited about the opportunity to collaborate in this creative endeavor. We look forward to deepening the bonds that are already forming, as well as the interesting artwork that will result.”

The Avella Scholarship Foundation was formed in that Washington County district to strengthen the bonds between community and school. Co-directors Joelle Cooper and Jamie Scears wanted to change what they perceived as a negative climate surrounding the school, students and community.

“We wanted to bring a positive spark back to the community that had been missing and we felt this was the best way to do it,” Cooper said. “We wanted to form a tight bond between the community and school that may not have been as strong in recent years.”

Among the foundation’s functions include funding activities for various events such as a summer camp, which attracted 60 elementary students, 40 high school volunteers and eight staff members.

“Students became mentors to younger kids, and it was really rewarding to see all of the hard work come to fruition at our first event,” Scears said.

Avella Elementary students are engaging in a number of programs that extend beyond the classroom, such as recently creating 240 birthday cards to help celebrate the 100th birthday of three McMurray Manor residents and the annual creation of blessing boxes for Thanksgiving.

Student-run coffee shops — Bic Mac Beanery at Canon-McMillan, Best Buddies at Beth-Center, the Coffee Cart at Avella and Coffee Tree Roasters at Peters Township, South Park and Chartiers Valley — have cropped up at schools.

Aside from traditional athletic teams, students are also being given the opportunity to excel in lesser-known sports programs.

Connellsville is home to a clay target team for grades 6 to 12, where about 60 kids are involved in skeet, sporting clays and trap. The sporting clays team won a national championship in 2022.

“We have a lot of kids cross over from other sports, but we get a lot of kids who don’t necessarily play your traditional sports,” said Ken Brooks, head coach. “It’s just a good all-around sport. Our first year, we had 28 kids and it’s grown ever since. It’s been very good for our school.”

Geibel Junior-Senior High School also has a team, and Uniontown is starting a program.

Bocce is a relatively recent offering and is part of the unified sports program of Special Olympics. Washington, Bethel Park and Trinity are among districts fielding teams.

“It’s nice for us to give our kids who might be in that realm the opportunity to participate in an after-school sport,” said Ricci Rich, Trinity athletic director. “It partners both our Special Olympics population with our other students to participate on a team together. We’ve got a good set of kids who are really getting excited about it.”

Ultimately, giving students more opportunities to explore their interests is the goal of extracurricular activities.

“We feel it’s essential,” Rich said. “Every kid needs an avenue to explore not only what they enjoy, but what they look at down the road. We try to provide kids with opportunities to learn about what you want to do and where do you want to spend your career before you move on to the next level.”