



C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health



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Report Highlights

Average total cost for the school year was \$302 per student in sports, \$218 for arts, and \$124 for clubs.

27% of parents from lower-income families cited a drop in participation in school activities due to cost.

1 in 4 students from lower-income families did not participate in any school activities in 2015-16.

Contact us

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics and Communicable Diseases, and the University of Michigan Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Center.

Pay-to-Participate Limiting School Activities for Lower-Income Students

Middle and high schools offer a range of activities—sports, arts, and clubs—to allow students to broaden their interests, develop their unique talents, and stay engaged with their school community. However, due to budget constraints, school activities may have a cost for participation.

In May 2016, the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children in middle or high school about participation in school activities during the 2015-16 school year.

Costs of School Activities

School pay-to-participate fees varied by type of activity, averaging \$139 per sport, \$116 per arts activity, and \$94 per club. However, participation fees were only one component of cost: with equipment, travel, private lessons, and special events, the average total cost per student for the school year was \$302 for sports participation, \$218 for arts participation, and \$124 for club participation. Low-cost options also varied by activity type: 60% of students in arts and clubs had \$0 total cost, compared to only 30% of students in sports.

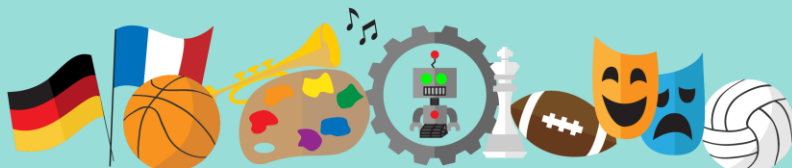
Household Income Linked to Participation in School Activities

About one quarter (27%) of parents in households earning <\$60,000/year said the cost of school activities caused a drop in participation for their child, compared to 12% in households earning ≥\$60,000/year. This decrease is reflected in the 24% of middle and high school students from lower-income families who did not participate in a single sport, arts, or club during the 2015-16 school year—more than double the proportion of students from higher-income families (11%). Ten percent of lower-income and 3% of higher-income families received a waiver for activity fees.

Participation in middle/high school activities varies by income

Reported by parents for 2015-2016 school year

	Household income < \$60,000	Household income ≥ \$60,000
Decreased participation due to cost	27%	12%
No participation in sports, arts or clubs	24%	11%



Source: C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health, 2016

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by GfK Custom Research, LLC (GfK), for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital via a method used in many published studies. The survey was administered in May 2016 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults age 18 and older (n=2,100). Adults were selected from GfK's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 63% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 666 parents who had at least one child attending middle or high school. The margin of error is ± 3 to 7 percentage points.

Implications

Participating in school activities can provide social, emotional, physical and intellectual benefits for children. School activities also strengthen the connections with peers and with their school community, enhancing the likelihood of graduation and preventing drop-outs.

Our previous Polls on costs of school sports ([May 2012](#), [January 2015](#)) found disparities in sports participation for middle and high school students from households earning <\$60,000/year. This new Mott Poll demonstrates that the income disparity found with school sports is also evident as applied to a broader array of school activities.

The most significant finding is that 1 in 4 students from lower-income families did not participate in any school sports, arts, or clubs during the 2015-16 school year. This represents a substantial portion of the school population that is not fully engaged in a well-rounded school experience. Related to this is the 27% of lower-income parents citing cost as the reason for decreased participation in school sports, arts and clubs – more than double the 12% of high-income parents citing a participation drop due to cost.

Clearly, financial burden is an important consideration for many families, and may override children's interest in pursuing school activities. Yet the lack of participation may be puzzling to school officials, as many school activities have no fee. Indeed, in this poll the majority of arts and clubs were reported by parents as having no cost. School officials may want to identify students who are not participating in any activities, to ensure that they know about opportunities to participate, that their parents are informed about fee waivers or other cost-reducing options, and that other barriers (e.g., transportation, lack of equipment) are addressed.

Findings from this poll indicate that the cost of participating in school sports is greater than the cost for arts or clubs, both in the proportion of teams or activities with a fee, and in the average cost. School officials should consider the equity of participation costs across the different types of activities, and ensure that students interested in sports have equal access to participation as students interested in music, theater, clubs, and other activities.

Financial challenges are not limited to lower-income families. In this report, 1 in 10 of parents from households earning ≥\$60,000 per year reported their child had decreased participation in school activities due to cost – a level similar to our [2015 report](#). School officials should note that fee waivers based exclusively on income (e.g., limited to students on free or reduced lunch) may fail to reach working families earning too much for program eligibility but not enough to afford the additional cost of activity fees.

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