

Students reclaim culture in years after pandemic

Spokane schools see surge in extracurricular involvement as teens rebuild community through clubs, sports



JESSE TINSLEY/THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW While restless seniors watch a rehearsal and line up for their turn on stage, Rogers High School Principal John Hammil, left, extends a hand to each graduate as they cross the stage inside the Podium sports complex Friday in preparation for the weekend's graduation ceremony.



JESSE TINSLEY/THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW Rogers High School Principal John Hammil smiles and stretches out his hand as each graduate walks across the stage Friday inside the Podium sports complex in preparation for the weekend graduation ceremonies.

BY ELENA PERRY THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Some of the colorful cords that adorn the hundreds of Spokane Public Schools' graduates this year represent their involvement in one of the school district's 1,024 unique activities.

Still feeling the side effects of COVID-induced school closures, school staff have made an effort to boost nonacademic

offerings to foster community in schools, an element staff hope will benefit attendance, mental health and reduce time kids spend on screens.

Through the past three school years, students have steadily become more engaged in the district, measured by involvement with a sport, club, the arts or a community group at school. In the 2022-23 school year, 29% of kids were engaged. The next year, it was just over half of students.

This school year, nearly 65% of students were engaged, and 64% of the senior class was involved in something nonacademic at school, according to the district.

For graduate Nermin Omar, Rogers High School senior class president, clubs enriched her experience at high school; she was, involved in her school's Amnesty International club, multicultural club, National Honors Society, Key Club and leadership.

"You can't just go to school and be like, 'I'm just going here for education,' " she said. "I think of school as my second home, I'm that nerd."

Favorites of hers, which she arduously selected from her extensive resume, were Amnesty International and multicultural club – both gatherings of peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, many hailing from other countries. This year, over 200 seniors joined "belonging-focused" clubs like this. Omar became Amnesty International's president her freshman year. An immigrant from Syria, she relished the chance to show off her culture. Omar is Kurdish, an ethnic group that resides in a region that encompasses parts of Syria, Iran, Iraq and Turkey .

Omar and her family fled the civil war in Syria when she was young, living in Turkey and eventually settling in Spokane, where she attended Logan Elementary as a fourth-grader and finally "started dreaming," she said.

Her Kurdish background is integral to Omar's identity, and the clubs gave her the space to express and explain her culture, beyond just saying she's from Syria, with peers who felt the same about their cultural identity.

"I need to show this to the school; we can't be known as just one simple country," she said.

Sports were another popular means to participate outside of academics among the class of 2025, with 127 seniors playing volleyball, 100 running in cross country, 85 playing baseball and 300 each in basketball and track and field, according to the district.

One of those 300 was Rogers' Daeante Bedford, who uses the latter two sports to keep in shape for football, his true athletic passion. After graduation, he's bound for a school in Iowa to play football.

Playing sports in high school helps motivate him with school, keeping his grades up so he stays academically eligible for the teams. It's also changed his attitude measurably, he said.

"If something didn't go my way, really I'd just get kind of mad about it. I had a short fuse, but I learned to have a lot more patience with people and help out people, too," Bedford said.

While clubs intend to foster belonging at school, On Track Academy graduates Hailey Bjornstad and Caitlynn Forech expressed a cycle that kept them from wanting to participate before transferring to On Track. Each said they didn't feel welcome at the traditional schools they attended before transferring to On Track, an option high school that focuses on project-based learning for those who don't thrive in the classic classroom setting.

"I wasn't really interested in anything; I low-key skipped a lot," Forech said. "I was home, that was lowkey when I was depressed too. I was going through a lot that year."

Because they didn't feel they belonged at school, there was nothing motivating them to join a club or activity. Part of the reason they don't feel connected at school was a lack of buy-in to the community, they said – something that the district aims to foster through clubs and activities.

After enrolling in On Track and finding their passions in teaching and stained glass, they now feel much more comfortable at school with friends and teachers to whom they've grown close.

Though a majority involve themselves outside of class, some are just trying to stay afloat with schoolwork and see graduation. That's the case for Rogers graduates Jasmine Contreras, Sarah Dahl and Dakota Nipp, three friends who don't have any regrets abstaining from clubs or sports in their high school careers.

“I feel like since COVID, a lot of us just kind of gave up on social cues, socializing, doing clubs and stuff,” Conteras said; the class of 2025 were in middle school when the schools closed from the pandemic.

“It was maybe social anxiety; it’s not really like the community like it used to be,” Dahl said.

Though their high school careers were focused on passing classes rather than joining extracurriculars, they don’t feel they’ve missed out. Conteras, enrolled at Spokane Falls Community College to study teaching, said she may consider clubs at that level. Maybe something in photography, an interest sparked through a class at Rogers.

When the class of 2027 crosses the graduate stage in two years, district staff have made it their goal to involve 78% of their students in an extracurricular activity.

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SPOKANE STUDENTS INVOLVED IN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Spokane Public Schools’ goal is to get 78% of students engaged in extracurricular activities by 2027.

Almost 65%, or 18,734 students, were involved in a school club, a sport, the arts or a community group this year.

Source: Spokane Public Schools