



Esports in schools and why it benefits students.

By James O'Hagan

Within the past year, you may have seen the word “esports” come across a newsfeed, heard your students talk about it, or in an article you may have read. The recent expansion of esports into mainstream culture has resulted in a lot of questions about its long-term viability. Some are not even really sure how to answer the question “what is esports?”

Esports is organized competitive multiplayer video games. Much like how when we talk about “sports,” it encompasses games/events like baseball, basketball, football and swimming. There are a lot of games that fall into the realm of esports, with some of the most popular being titles such as *League of Legends*, *Overwatch*, *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, *Rocket League* and, of course, *Fortnite*. But while there may be those who dedicate many hours to playing these games, it does not necessarily constitute competing in esports. Though I may hit a baseball in a batting cage for several hours, it does not mean I am a baseball player. The difference is similar between “gaming” and “esports.” Esports takes organization and dedication similar to traditional sports.

Now esports is moving into education, with some wondering if playing video games in their school is appropriate. But would you be so quick to shut off your child’s video game system if you knew that it could be a portal to a scholarship at an international university, or a career in a billion-dollar industry? What about if it led to a reduction in your child’s anxiety, better connections with his/her peers or an interest in developing better sleep and nutritional habits?

In education, we are always looking to engage students in ways we have not been able to in the past. Pew Research shows 97% of boys and 83% of girls ages 13 to 17, identify as being a gamer of some kind.¹ Those demographics cut across race and socio-economics. Imagine how different our schools would look if those same demographics identified as artists, or as dancers, or musicians. The difference being no one is told they draw too much, or dance too much, or play an instrument too much. The messaging for video games has largely been they are a waste of time. But this is the modern space children are choosing to play, and play is at the heart of esports.





To properly embrace esports in education, and harness its potential, one must think beyond the games. To have these demographics interested in something to this level, in this case “gaming,” we must tap that intrinsic motivation and start to look at where we can further engage students.

It starts with five core reasons:

1. Redefine athletic culture
2. Diversify opportunities for student participation
3. Promote good mental and physical health
4. Create career and collegiate scholarship pathways
5. Honor the importance of play

To redefine athletic culture, esports allows children of all races and genders to compete in a space where those aspects of their identity are not as prominent or important to their overall performance. Esports brings opportunity for everyone to come together in a shared space around a love of gaming that can be safer than other unregulated online gaming spaces.

By bringing these children together, you can now begin to diversify opportunities for student participation. No longer are students tracked into one activity or another based on their physical or mental abilities. And once we have children engaged in school activities they enjoy, research shows their grade point average increases and their attendance improves, which leads to an overall increase in high school graduation rates.

Having these children intrinsically motivated to be part of their school’s esports experience, the conversation now begins to shift toward things typically not associated with video games: positive mental and physical health. It is important to note at a school level, we are not focused on creating professional esports athletes. Because of the larger ecosystem being introduced to children involved in esports, calling them “esports athletes” is a disservice. The term better used would be “scholar gamer” as it encompasses the idea of the larger efforts to develop an ecosystem.

As part of this ecosystem, we do employ aspects of traditional sports training because research shows by including activities like weight training, we can help develop complex reasoning skills or meditation so students may keep their heart rates steady at the peak of competition, or aerobic training as we hope to promote problem solving skills. And where mental health is a concern, the two best ways to promote good mental health is with positive adult interaction and through play. With esports, we are putting our children into an experience where both play and a mentor are prevalent.

Colleges have also begun to take note of esports and are attracting students with scholarships of varying sizes. In 2023, there will be an estimated \$100 million in scholarship money available related to esports. The collegiate programs vary in level of quality of experience, as all colleges do, based largely on the goals of the program. There is quickly becoming a fit for everyone. But in order to access these scholarships, the opportunity is greatly enhanced when high schools formally embrace esports into their school culture.



Probably the most important aspect of esports to be considered is this is all about play at its heart. This is the space our children are choosing to play. We have a generation of students who have grown up in the age of “No Child Left Behind” that places a high emphasis on high stakes testing, which largely has forced play to be left behind. By providing these environments for children to play, we are helping to defray the issue of online toxicity, work with our children in their play spaces, and help them navigate them as we would a traditional playground.

As adults, most of us are standing on the edge of a virtual world that our children have already entered. Esports provides a realm to master their passions and develop tangible opportunities. **Let's pick up a controller and join them there.**



About the author:

James O'Hagan is a leader in connecting and promoting esports in education. He has had a role in starting and growing esports teams in two large urban school districts. He actively promotes esports as being a medium to something more for students beyond the games. His podcast, The Academy of Esports delves into topics surrounding esports and education and connecting into powerful ideas to increase student agency, motivation, and college and career pathways. James is a doctoral candidate at Northern Illinois University in the field of instructional technology and an active rugby player.



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