Pay-to-play hinders progress in schools
Pay-to-participate fees are a barrier to participation for poor and middle class children in extracurricular activities in Ohio schools
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To be successful in life, there are certain attributes a person must possess — a strong work ethic, courage, good character, perseverance, and knowledge of how to work with others. These are success skills.

These skills must be learned at an early age.

One of the best ways for kids to develop them is by participating in extracurricular activities while in school.

Research shows that involvement in extracurricular activities often has a more significant impact in determining a young person’s future success than grades in the classroom. We wouldn’t think of charging for math classes or other courses that contribute to academic development. We shouldn’t charge for expenses like band, chorus, or basketball that contribute to character development.

There is growing evidence that these “pay-to-participate” fees serve as a financial barrier for extracurricular participation among poor and middle-class children. We need to knock down this barrier so more children will have access to the character-building experiences these activities provide.

In 2012, a pair of researchers (Lumpkin & Favor) released a study of 140,000 Kansas high school students that found, across the board, those involved in extracurricular activities had better GPAs and higher graduation rates.

But extracurricular activities like band and football aren’t the only places where a young person can learn good life skills. An after-school job and a strong family unit also play a significant role in developing these traits and preparing students for the future.

Unfortunately, too many children are becoming adults without ever learning these essential life principles.

A 2015 study by the Pew Research Center shows fewer teens are working part-time jobs after school and during the summer. In 1978, 58 percent of young people between 16 and 19 years old had a summer job, but in 2010, that number had plummeted to just 29.6 percent and has barely budged since.
Add this to the fact that the family unit in America is as broken as it has ever been and children are the ones who are paying the price. More than 940,000 Ohio children live in a single parent household and a startling 75 percent of children in Cleveland live with only one of their parents. In addition to being a part of crumbling family units, we know these kids are also being born into poverty with Ohio’s Medicaid program having paid for more than 52 percent of births in 2013.

Children need structure. They need discipline. And they need opportunities to develop good life skills. Extracurricular activities give children the opportunities they need, but when pay-to-participate fees are imposed, we put these opportunities out of reach for many families.

Having these qualities in your life is what makes you a good student, a good employee, a good spouse, a good parent, and a better person.

If we believe that character development is just as important as academic development, then we should stop charging fees that serve as a barrier to success.