

The guide to managing school and co-curriculars

Balancing school and co-curricular activities is not about doing everything, but doing the right things well. Experts warn that too many commitments can hurt both grades and well-being.

BY GLORIA IRANKUNDA

For many teens, co-curricular activities are not optional. They feel necessary and teachers encourage them. These could be football practice after school, debate club meetings and choir rehearsals.

When you are busy, involved, and visible in these activities, you may not realise the toll they take on your studies. But after a while, the cracks start to show.

You are tired in class. Assignments are rushed. Your grades begin to slip. Or worse, you feel constantly anxious because you are always behind.

According to Isaac Ssewanyana, a psychologist based in Kampala, the belief that teens can handle everything at once often backfires.

One activity at a time

Doing homework during club meetings. Listening in class while thinking about practice later, often leads to doing everything poorly.

Ssewanyana encourages teens to focus on one thing at a time.

"When you study, study. When you are at practice, be fully present. This improves both your performance and your satisfaction. You feel less scattered and more in control," he explains.

Even short, focused study sessions can be powerful if you remove distractions.

"The human brain, especially in adolescents, is not wired for constant multitasking," Ssewanyana explains. "When students divide their attention across too many demands, the quality of their work drops. They may feel busy, but they are not necessarily productive."

He adds that students think doing many things will make them stand out. But in reality, it affects their performance both in class and in those same activities.

Know why

Before signing up for anything, pause and

ask yourself why you are doing it.

"Is it because you genuinely enjoy it? Is it helping you build a skill you care about? Or are you doing it because everyone else is?" Dinavence Muliisa, teacher at Manyangwa High School advises.

There is nothing wrong with trying new things. But when your schedule starts to feel overwhelming, your "why" becomes your filter. It helps you decide what to keep and what to let go.

"For example, if you love writing, maybe the school magazine matters more than joining three random clubs. If sports energise you, then one team might be enough instead of juggling multiple," she recommends.

Clarity reduces pressure

Co-curricular activities matter, but your grades still carry weight. They are your academic foundation.

"When grades drop significantly, it affects your options later on. This does not mean you should abandon activities. It means your academics need protection," Muliisa explains.

Muliisa describes time like money.

"Your studies should always have a guaranteed 'budget' that includes time for attending classes, revising, and completing assignments properly. Everything else should fit around that, not replace it," she adds.

If you notice your grades slipping, take it seriously early.

"Do not wait until exams are around the corner. Adjust your schedule. Cut back where needed," she cautions.

Time management

While 'time management' is often mentioned, many students are not sure how to apply it in real life.

Muliisa advises students to start

with a simple approach.

"Write down your weekly schedule. Include classes, activities, and assignments. Then identify realistic time slots for studying," she says.

She also cautions against overloading evenings.

"After a full day of school and activities, the brain is tired. Students should not plan very heavy study sessions late at night. It is better to study earlier or break work into smaller parts," she says.

Ssewanyana adds that focus is just as important as planning.

"A student who studies for one hour without distractions can achieve more than one who spends three hours switching between books and their phone," he observes.

Check in with yourself

Balance is not a one-time decision. It is ongoing. What works this term may not work next term. Your workload changes. Your interests evolve. Your energy levels shift.

Take time to check in with yourself regularly.

"Are you constantly stressed? Are your grades stable? Do you still enjoy your activities? If the answer to these questions is not positive, something needs to change," Ssewanyana advises.

Seek support

Balancing academics and activities is not something students have to figure out alone. Ssewanyana encourages open commu-

LEARN TO SAY NO

Michael Hategeka, a sciences teacher at Manyangwa High School, says saying no is the hardest skill in teenagers, but also the most important.

Opportunities will keep coming. New clubs, leadership roles and competitions. It is easy to say yes to everything, especially when you do not want to miss out.

"But every yes is also a no to something else. Sometimes that 'something else' is your sleep, your peace of mind, or your grades. Saying no does not mean you are lazy or unmotivated. It means you understand your limits," Hategeka explains.

If your schedule is already full, it is okay to say, 'I cannot take that on right now.' "People may not say it often, but they respect it more than you think," he adds.

nication.

"If a student is struggling, they should talk to their teachers or club leaders. They can help them adjust their load or find solutions," he says.

Parents also play a role. Understanding a student's schedule and offering support at home can ease pressure.

"Sometimes expectations from home add to the stress," Ssewanyana adds. "When parents and schools work together, it creates a more supportive environment for the student."

Make time for rest



One of the most overlooked aspects of balance is rest.

"In our culture, being constantly busy is often praised," Ssewanyana observes. "But rest is not laziness. It is necessary for learning and mental health."

Lack of sleep, he explains, affects memory, concentration, and mood. Over time, it can lead to burnout.

Hategeka agrees. "When students do not rest, their ability to process and retain information reduces. They may feel like they are working hard, but their performance does not reflect it," he says.

Redefine success

One of the biggest shifts students need to make is how they define success.

"It is not about being in every club or winning every competition," says Ssewanyana. "It is about growth, learning, and well-being."

He encourages students to focus on what truly matters to them.

"When you align your activities with your interests and strengths, you are more likely to excel and feel satisfied," he says.

Find your own balance

There is no one-size-fits-all formula for balancing co-curricular activities and grades. What works for one student may not work for another.

"The principles, however, remain clear. Know your limits. Prioritise your academics. Choose activities that genuinely matter to you. Plan your time realistically and leave room to rest," Hategeka emphasises.

"Balance is not about perfection. It is about making choices that allow you to grow without overwhelming yourself," Ssewanyana says.

Avoid comparison

It is easy to feel like everyone else is managing perfectly. You see posts of achievements, trophies, events, and celebrations.

What you do not see is the stress behind the scenes. The late nights. The missed deadlines. The moments of doubt.

"Do not measure your life against someone else's highlight reel. Your journey is your own."

Focus on what works for you, not what looks impressive online," Muliisa recommends.

