



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2025.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

### PROGRAM INFORMATION

**County:** Henrico County, Virginia

**Program Title:** Increasing Student Engagement Through Esports

**Program Category:** Health and Human Services

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

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**Title:** Chief of Communications, Henrico County Public Schools

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## **1. Summary**

Henrico County Public Schools' Middle School Esports Connection program taps into students' passion for gaming to improve attendance, boost engagement and foster a deeper sense of belonging at school. At a time when chronic absenteeism affects nearly one in three students nationwide, and middle schoolers face a sharp drop in school engagement known as the "engagement cliff," HCPS' program offers a timely and powerful solution.

Why team-based gaming, known as esports? Because over 93% of Generation Alpha students — today's eighth graders and younger — say video gaming is their favorite form of entertainment. The school division is meeting students where they are by launching esports clubs in middle schools that previously offered no gaming-related activities. These inclusive, team-based experiences harness a popular pastime to drive connection, giving students a reason to come to school and a place where they belong.

With support from the Henrico Education Foundation, the program aims to reduce absenteeism and disruptive behavior while boosting academic performance, especially in math and science. By turning a favorite pastime into a purpose-driven path, HCPS is reimagining engagement and building a school culture where every student feels seen, valued and ready for life after graduation.

## **2. The Problem or Need for the Program**

The HCPS Middle School Esports Connection program addresses critical issues affecting middle school students, including declining engagement, chronic absenteeism and the need for future-ready skills. Data reveals the existence of a "middle school engagement cliff," with student engagement dropping 22-34% between fifth and ninth grades, contributing to disengagement and poor academic outcomes. Chronic absenteeism affects nearly 30% of students nationally and disproportionately affects HCPS middle schools, where rates reached 30% at Brookland Middle School and 22% at Fairfield Middle School before the program's implementation.

Because STEM careers are projected to grow 10.8% by 2031, the program prepares students with relevant skills using the popularity of gaming to foster engagement, belonging and teamwork. The program addresses these challenges by providing inclusive opportunities beyond traditional activities, aligning with the division's commitment to helping every student succeed.

## **3. Description of the Program**

The Middle School Esports Connection program is an innovative initiative to increase student engagement, reduce chronic absenteeism and provide pathways to STEM and technology-related career opportunities. This program was developed in response to national and local challenges, such as the middle school engagement cliff and rising rates of chronic absenteeism, which affect nearly 30% of students nationwide, including at some HCPS middle schools.

### **Program Development and Goals**

Launched in 2022, the program was made possible through funding from the Henrico Education

Foundation. It targets middle school students who are disengaged or at risk of chronic absenteeism, using esports to foster belonging, improve attendance and enhance academic outcomes. Research-backed benefits of esports include improved student engagement, stronger social connections and increased interest in STEM fields. The program also aligns with HCPS' strategic goals to promote equity, inclusion and academic growth.

Key outcomes for the program include:

- **Reducing chronic absenteeism:** Club members' absenteeism decreased to 3.3%, compared to the overall school average of 19%.
- **Improving academic performance:** Participants had fewer D and F grades in math (7.7% vs. 13.9% schoolwide) and science (1.2% vs. 8%).
- **Enhancing engagement:** The clubs provide a sense of belonging, which is crucial for counteracting the engagement drop of 22% seen between grades 6-8.

### **Timeline and implementation**

The program's implementation began in the fall of 2022 by establishing esports clubs at Brookland, Fairfield and Tuckahoe middle schools. The timeline includes:

- **October 2022:** Identifying and recruiting 25-50 students per school based on attendance, behavior and academic performance data.
- **November 2022:** Launch clubs with initial meetings during advisory blocks to promote on-time attendance and consistent participation.
- **December 2022:** Hosting intraclub competitions to foster teamwork and pride, followed by interschool tournaments.
- **Spring 2023:** Clubs showcased their activities at "Henrico 21," the division's innovation exhibition, providing public exposure and celebrating student achievements.

Program facilitators continue to hold regular meetings, competitions and skill-building activities, with evaluations conducted at key milestones to measure the impacts on attendance, engagement and academic success.

### **Students involved**

The program serves students in grades 6–8, emphasizing inclusivity. Targeted recruitment focuses on students who are not engaged in traditional extracurricular activities, have poor attendance records or express an interest in gaming. Esports provide a welcoming environment for students from diverse backgrounds, offering a constructive outlet and opportunities for growth.

### **The role of Henrico County Public Schools**

Henrico County Public Schools plays a pivotal role in supporting the program. Beyond securing HEF funding, the division provides gaming consoles, monitors and technical support infrastructure. HCPS innovative learning coaches and school administrators collaborate with club sponsors to ensure the program's success, coordinating competitions and integrating social and emotional learning in club activities. HCPS also promotes the program through division events and professional learning sessions, aiming to expand esports opportunities to more schools.

### **Conclusion**

HCPS' Middle School Esports Connection program exemplifies how innovative solutions can address persistent educational challenges. By using students' passion for gaming, the program strengthens their connection to school and prepares them for future success in STEM-related fields. Its success has positioned esports as a transformative tool for re-engaging middle school students and fostering a supportive, inclusive school community

#### **4. Advancing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**

Esports is one of the most inclusive and diverse activities available to school students, welcoming participants from every background, ability and identity. Unlike traditional extracurricular activities that often favor extroverted students, esports creates a safe and equitable space for introverted, neurodivergent and underserved students who might not otherwise feel a sense of belonging in school. Studies show that 43% of esports participants are neurodivergent, dealing with challenges like autism, ADHD and anxiety. Through gaming, these students find community, confidence and leadership opportunities.

Esports clubs bridge gaps in access and engagement by attracting students who have never participated in traditional activities. Nearly 90% of participants report it as their first extracurricular, providing an avenue for building relationships, developing teamwork and improving communication skills. This inclusivity extends to students with disabilities, as esports levels the playing field, offering equal opportunities to excel.

Beyond gaming, esports fosters essential social-emotional skills like resilience, collaboration and strategic thinking, which are vital for academic and professional success. Students involved in esports experience improved attendance, better grades and increased enthusiasm for school.

Through its unique ability to unite students of all backgrounds, esports ensures diversity, equity and inclusion are at the heart of education.

#### **5. The Cost of the Program**

The HCPS Middle School Esports Connection program began with an initial investment of \$9,000 from the Henrico Education Foundation to create pilot-program clubs at three middle

schools. This funding was instrumental in establishing foundational resources such as gaming consoles, controllers, games and other essential materials. Following a successful semester-long pilot program, organizers recognized the program's potential and HCPS allocated an additional \$12,000 to expand esports opportunities.

The program also received a \$12,000 Meta Communities in Action grant, which further supported its growth. Combined, these funds enabled all 12 HCPS middle schools to launch esports clubs, with each school receiving approximately \$3,000. This funding was used to purchase gaming equipment, team jerseys and practice essentials, ensuring that all students had access to quality resources. Additionally, snacks for practices and events were provided to foster a welcoming and supportive team environment.

In total, the program used \$33,000 in combined grants and division funding to establish and sustain esports clubs. This cost-effective model highlights the program's scalability and its ability to deliver significant student engagement, attendance and academic benefits at a modest per-school cost. The investment demonstrates the division's commitment to equity and innovation, providing students with opportunities to thrive in a rapidly growing field.

## **6. The Results/Success of the Program**

The HCPS Middle School Esports Connection program has significantly improved student engagement, attendance and academic performance in Henrico County. By targeting key issues such as chronic absenteeism and declining student engagement, the program has created a positive ripple effect throughout participating schools.

**Attendance and engagement:** One of the most remarkable outcomes has been the program's effect on chronic absenteeism. At Brookland Middle School, absentee rates dropped from 30% to zero among esports participants, while Fairfield and Tuckahoe middle schools saw similar reductions. Students consistently cite the club as a reason to attend school, as it provides a unique sense of belonging that traditional activities may not offer.

**Behavior and academic improvement:** Behavioral improvements have also been notable. Participants have shown increased focus, teamwork and communication skills during both practices and competitions. Academic results echo this success: students involved in esports clubs had significantly fewer D and F grades compared to their peers. At Brookland Middle School, for example, esports participants outperformed their classmates in math and science, with lower percentages of failing grades (7.7% in math versus 13.9% schoolwide).

**Broader educational benefits:** Esports clubs have provided students with opportunities to explore STEM-related skills, such as strategic planning, coding, game design and event production. Students gain experience in leadership roles, shoutcasting and managing events, preparing them for careers in the rapidly growing fields of STEM and esports. The program has also exposed participants to potential scholarships and collegiate esports opportunities.

**Testimonials and student perspectives:** Students frequently express how the program has transformed their school experience, helping them feel more connected to their peers and school communities. Parents and educators note that students who were previously disengaged are now thriving, motivated by their involvement in a team-based activity.

### **Expanding impact**

The program has grown from a pilot program involving three schools to all 12 HCPS middle schools, thanks to funding from the Henrico Education Foundation and additional grants. Its



success has inspired plans to expand esports opportunities to elementary and high schools, broadening access and benefits in the years to come.

In summary, the HCPS Middle School Esports Connection program has proven to be a highly effective initiative, driving measurable improvements in attendance, behavior and academic performance while providing students with vital life and career skills. The unique program is a model for how schools can employ innovative strategies to engage students and prepare them for future success.

## **7. Worthiness of Award**

HCPS' Middle School Esports Connection program exemplifies innovation in addressing critical issues for children and youth, including chronic absenteeism, student engagement and academic performance. By taking advantage of students' natural interest in gaming, the program creates a sense of belonging, fosters teamwork and builds leadership and problem-solving skills.

Esports clubs have demonstrated measurable success, reducing chronic absenteeism from 30% to 0% among participants at Brookland Middle School and improving grades in math and science divisionwide. The program also supports students' social and emotional development, offering inclusive opportunities for neurodivergent students and those who often feel disconnected from traditional extracurricular activities.

Beyond immediate benefits, the program provides a path to STEM careers, collegiate scholarships and leadership roles. It addresses the "middle school engagement cliff," providing an effective mechanism for students to remain connected and prepared for future success. The

program represents a scalable model that can support students' growth through education, innovation and inclusion.

## 8. Supplemental Materials

- HCPS news story: [Inside HCPS: An esports Competition at Middle School? Call it a 'Smash' Hit - July 13, 2023](#)
- Magazine story: [Education Week: How Video Games Can Combat Chronic Absenteeism \(Yes, Really\)](#) July 02, 2024