

After-school activities help freshmen connect to school

Educators say that participating in at least one club or activity increase a student's chances of graduating high school.

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Caleb Beck's friends didn't have to do much in September to convince him to join his school's American Sign Language and Key clubs.

The 14-year-old Warhill High School freshman didn't know much about sign language or the community-service oriented Key Club when he signed up for the clubs, but he knew girls would be a part of both after-school activities and he decided to get involved.

"I saw a whole bunch of girls signing up so I decided to give the clubs a try," Beck said. "I really like being a part of the clubs and I'm learning a lot from them. The best part is staying back after school."

Educators say high school students join school-sponsored clubs and activities for a variety of reasons, which include interest in the activity or club, the desire to hang out with friends, the chance to try something new or to meet new people. But whatever the student's motivation, education experts say it is important for them to get involved with some type of extracurricular activity during high school, especially during the freshman year.

"Clubs and organizations take a large high school environment and personalizes it for our young people," said Cynthia Cooper, executive director of youth development for Newport News Public Schools. "A lot of things you do in ninth grade and high school as a whole are dictated by curriculum, but clubs allow students to make choices and gives them more ownership in their education."

Teachers and high school principals agree, saying school clubs and activities help students feel connected to their schools beyond the classroom.

Hampton High School Principal Myra Chambers said that sense of connection is critical to students' success during their ninth-grade year and throughout high school.

"They're moving from middle school, which is a lot smaller environment, to high school," Chambers said. "In high school, the school is larger, students are bigger and teachers expect a lot more from them, so it's easy to feel overwhelmed.

"It's critical for them to develop a sense of belonging and link to more than just their teacher," Chambers continued. "When students join clubs they meet older students and teachers who they may not have class with and form bonds with them."

Beck has already made a strong connection with Warhill's ASL teacher and Club Sponsor Afton Bell. He met Bell through his friends earlier this year and their relationship grew stronger after he joined her club.