



You've probably heard the term 'esports' sometime in the last year or two – maybe in a conversation with a gamer, maybe on the Internet, or maybe in some context associated with education and students. While there's little remaining doubt that esports has grown into a bit of a phenomenon, there is still more to be learned about the direction the sport will take and how it will mesh with students. In colleges and even high schools across the country, esports leagues, teams, and tournaments are being created, giving students a new way to participate in interscholastic competition. And, while it's unclear just how big esports will get, it's already provided value in the education community.

So, what exactly is esports and why has it gotten so popular so quickly?



It's an incredibly fast growing, international industry that's appealed to people across multiple generations, including lifelong gamers and K-12 students. Like traditional sports, including baseball, basketball, and football, teams of gamers go up against each other in a virtual competition as opposed to an actual, on-field faceoff. As a whole, esports includes any organized video game competition with opponents squaring off in the same games – games that have been popular with players for years. Beyond that, esports isn't only for the competitors. The creation of leagues and tournaments has led to the emergence of huge esports fans, who tune in to broadcasts, attend live events, and even place bets on who they think will win.

But, besides being a money-making endeavor for professional gamers, esports brands, and sponsors, esports has brought with it value for younger gamers as well. We're talking about students – yes, middle school, high school, and college students. The benefits go beyond those that are academic or financial

(though there are many of these) and are very much aligned with the experiences student-athletes gain from competition and highlighted in the relationships they form through teamwork. Teamwork and collaboration, of course, can be translated to both academic and real-world successes as can the knowledge about computer hardware, collaboration, networks, and video production.

“One of the biggest benefits I’ve seen from students joining esports programs is simply finding their place in school,” said Adam Pomella, a high school physics teacher in Massachusetts, who recently helped start an esports program at his school.

“Kids who don’t have other attachments in high school tend to find that attachment and sense of belonging by joining a team. It really helps build friendships and, more importantly, helps create a collaborative environment based on teamwork.”

Esports in the Academic Space

Esports helps foster a sense of structured competition and collaborative teamwork among students on school teams, leading to a much quicker rate of adoption. It was once thought of as a niche area, but now students are able to earn varsity esports letters in high school, compete in official events at the college level, and even earn college scholarships in the same way a football or basketball player would.

In fact, there are currently over 1,200 teams that are part of the High School Esports League, a number that is up from approximately 200 in just one year, according to Dell EMC, and is expected to continue growing in the next few years. Beyond that, esports viewership is expected to top 555 million by 2021, according to Newzoo, indicating that its popularity and growth at the high school level will rise as well. At the college level, many school programs are fully sanctioned and supported and some even have esports rooms equipped with gaming equipment and high-speed connections much like players within a sports program have a dedicated weight room.

When it comes to college scholarships, they tend to range between \$3,000 and \$12,000, according to the website, Lineups. The highest paying esports scholarship they reported is for \$25,000 at Arcadia University in Pennsylvania. Other big name colleges that offer esports scholarships include the University of Southern California, Ohio State University, Marquette University, the University of California Irvine, and Boise State University. Notable colleges with an esports program include the University of Oregon, University of Utah, Carnegie Mellon University, UCLA, the University of Arizona, Florida State University, Providence College, and many others.

At the high school level, esports is typically something students do for fun, to make friends, and, in a lot of cases, in place of a traditional sport -- sometimes choosing esports over the opportunity to play a different varsity sport. While it’s great to build this type of atmosphere, esports coaches have to grapple with providing enough power for gaming. Different processors offer different benefits, including handling different tasks simultaneously and delivering high frames per second. This, of course, means that someone looking to implement esports in a school would likely have to find a balance between cost

and power so that gamers are able to keep up and budgets aren't stretched too far. Below are some of the options we consider to be viable in a K-12 esports setting.

Specification	Minimum	Recommended
Processor	i3 or higher	i5 or higher
Main Memory	4 GB	8-12 GB
OS	Windows 10 Pro	Windows 10 Pro
Disk Drive	250+ GB	SSD, 500+ GB
Desktop vs. Laptop	Either	Desktop
Internet Connection	Hard wired	Hard wired
Monitor Output	100mhz	100mhz
Monitor Size	24 inches	28 inches
Keyboard	Standard	Mechanical
Mouse	Standard	Gaming Mouse
Gaming Chair	Optional	Mandatory
Desk	Optional	Mandatory
Team Shirts	Optional	Recommended
Coaches	Mandatory	Mandatory

As for establishing an esports program at the high school level, no one is expecting fancy arenas or even the latest computing equipment. Computers and monitors are necessary, however, and, for the best experience, they do need quite a bit of processing power. Beyond that, these programs also need some kind of support at the administrative level and someone who is willing to coach (this is often a member of the school's faculty). A lot of consideration is also given to the space in which meetings take place, including how screens are set up, how Internet connections are established, and even the types of furniture used.

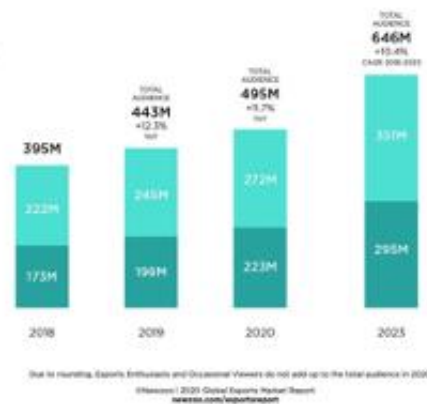
Some high school administrators have gone as far as creating dedicated esports arenas for students, but this is not completely necessary for getting started.



ESPORTS AUDIENCE GROWTH

GLOBAL | FOR 2018, 2019, 2020, 2023

● OCCASIONAL VIEWERS
● ESPORTS ENTHUSIASTS



“It’s definitely growing in terms of popularity,” Pomella said of the sport and the camaraderie it helps create among students with shared interests. “It picked up much quicker than I expected, starting with just seven kids and, now this season, we’re up to 15.”

They participate in the PlayVS league and have taken part in three different games, but their main one is League of Legends. For these students, it’s just two days a week after school, but Pomella says he’s seen the students he’s worked with develop their teamwork and collaboration skills very quickly.

“We play right in the classroom,” he said. “It could be a team from one school versus a team from another school or we could be playing against teams from a few different schools. We only have one day of competition per week and one day of practice, but I’ve really made it a point to get the kids to see that they could have the best players in the world, but, if they’re not working together, they’re a lot less likely to succeed.”

A Legitimate Path to College

Not every high school or college esports team plays in a temporarily repurposed classroom, however. At Burlington High School (MA), they’ve built their own esports facility known as AREA 123.



“Our esports program started three years ago as an afterschool club with students playing only against each other and using their own systems, like a Nintendo Switch or PS 4,” said Dennis Vilano, Director of Instructional Technology, with the Burlington Public Schools. “We eventually started getting into more structured competition with participation in the National Esports League.”

Before becoming home to the school’s esports team (among its other uses), AREA 123 was a training room used primarily for adult learning and professional development. Vilano completely gutted the space and transformed it into one of the most high-end esports spaces in the state. Altogether, the project cost the district about \$150,000 with about \$50,000 of that going to computers alone and Vilano justified the cost as using the space to promote teamwork in a sport that could ultimately help students get into college. The room now has four huge TVs and speakers on the ceiling, offering students a complete gaming experience and offering educators a revamped space for professional meetings as well.

“Our district leaders weren’t even sure what esports was when I pitched them the idea,” Vilano said. “But, once they saw the examples and the future that kids could have, they were very supportive. Knowing that students could potentially earn college scholarships for playing esports, I think, helped convince them.”

There are over 200 colleges that offer esports scholarships at the moment, providing tuition to students to come play esports at the school, just like an on-field athlete would get. In fact, in the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District (MA), that has been seen firsthand by Steve Martin, the district’s Director of Athletics.

“Some of the kids in our esports program have been offered esports scholarships, including one student who was offered a full ride to go play esports,” he said.

In just a few short years, the esports program at Acton-Boxborough has grown into a powerhouse, giving students who may not have the desire or the ability to compete athletically to find another way to experience the benefits of a team sport. Their team has competed at both the state and national levels,

earning a second-place finish in the Massachusetts state championship as well as a finals appearance in a national tournament.

“More kids showed up for the introductory esports meeting at the beginning of the school year than there were for the football team,” Martin said.

In the case of the Acton-Boxborough team, they won a bunch of gaming equipment for successful finishes in tournaments, including laptops, desktops, mice, and headphones – all of which are needed for all-in esports competition. This helped really launch their program and made it easier on district officials to continue building it. Like with traditional interscholastic sports, their teams are separated into a varsity squad and a junior varsity squad with the top 12 players competing in meets (six on each team). Each team has a captain, who meets with the coach twice a week to plan for the next opponent and talk strategy. In fact, the captain of the esports team at Acton-Boxborough next school year is going to be a girl, though Martin estimates that girls make up roughly just 10 percent of the total esports participation.

The Costs Associated with Esports Programs

Another factor to consider is that joining a competitive esports league brings with it a cost for each player – much like traditional student-athletes are met with. In Martin’s case, each of the players paid their own way to play this past year. Whether it’s competing in the PlayVS league, High School Esports League, or another organized institution, this is typically a requirement.

Even with students paying a fee to play, the cost of equipment is an expense for the school system – typically at the district level. “The biggest thing you need to start, above infrastructure, is funding,” Martin said. “You need high-end equipment and to create something legitimate for kids to want to join and be a part of this and play. Not having the equipment available to them is something that might hold some kids back. You have to have the equipment that’s just as good as what they have at home and you also need someone with the knowledge who can put in the time.”

Coaching Commitment: Building Gaming and Real-World Skills

With that remark, he raised a good point. As Pomella said, he was approached to coach the esports team at Oliver Ames High School because of his knowledge of gaming. Not every school is going to have a faculty member who is willing and capable of putting in the time to learn about the games, the equipment, the finances, the logistics of esports competition, and the schedule – all of which are important elements to getting started.

Oftentimes, it begins with a willing coach and a small group of kids who just want to play for fun and be a part of something. The kinds of bonds and connections they form while taking part in esports competitions are some of the strongest in interscholastic sports – and they’re not limited to just their own team either.

“Sportsmanship and respect of opponents is one thing I’ve seen from our kids and kids from schools we’ve played against,” Martin said. “Kids talk to each other after the match. They’re talking strategy and complementing one another on specific things they did while playing. You don’t see that after a football game. The sportsmanship in the esports world is awesome to see.”

In addition to teamwork and collaboration, communication is another real-world skill that’s required for success in esports competition. It’s one that Martin has seen his players really start to develop and perfect.

“Communication is huge in order to be successful in esports, especially electronic communication,” Martin said. When schools and sports shut down in the spring of 2020 due to the coronavirus crisis, many esports teams and leagues were still functioning albeit from home and not with all the bells and whistles they’d have had in person. For many of these students, they never lost that connection they have with their teammates despite being physically isolated. They were still able to connect every day, talk strategy, work together, learn from each other, and continue participating in something they’re passionate about.



Other Avenues Related to Esports

Beyond helping students build the soft skills and foster teamwork and sportsmanship skills, esports and the technology associated with it can help them develop other valuable skills for the future, too. Take marketing, for example. That might be something you wouldn’t naturally associate with video gaming – it’s okay, our eyebrows were raised when we first heard about this connection, too.

In most esports events, the maximum number of students who are actually playing in the competitions is 12. There are, however, oftentimes a lot more students than that who are a part of the team in other ways – eventually earning a spot to play as they get older or better. The esports industry has become enormous over the last few years and more people than just the players have made careers out

of the sport. A lot of those careers are in marketing. Professional gaming has become so popular that fans show up to watch matches or stream them online. This requires that teams and players be marketed to the world and educators have caught on to this side of things as well. Besides that, affordable streaming tools, like Stadia from Google, are emerging as popularity surrounding this trend increases. While tools like this aren't a fixture in K-12 schools at the moment, it's a trend we're keeping an eye on for the near future.

For students who aren't among the school's active players in matches, they can be the ones marketing the team, their space, and the experiences they have. Many school esports teams have someone maintaining a social media profile on Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat. Others might even start live streaming the matches on a platform like Twitch or creating content to send out to a mailing list or publish on the school or team website. The possibilities for marketing in esports are pretty extensive and give those students who are interested a potential career path within an area that excites them.

Building an Esports Foundation

It's often best for students to start exploring the various niche areas of esports once they've gotten their feet wet. As school programs start to grow in size and popularity, there will be more opportunities for students to take on other roles, including marketing or broadcasting. In order to get school esports programs off the ground, however, it starts with the infrastructure. In planning, you should also create a clear purpose for a school esports program and set attainable goals that relate to academics, social experiences, or both. Also, it's important to involve all members of the school community so they can weigh in. This includes administrators, teachers, parents, board members, IT professionals, budget specialists, counselors, and students themselves.

Having varying viewpoints, including a counselor who might be thinking about the effects of violent games, for example, can be very valuable. The existence of violent games, in particular, presents a dilemma for some esports coaches. They know students like these games and can often succeed when playing them together. At the high school level, we feel it's a bit too controversial to let students play these types of games, especially since there are plenty of different options to choose from when it comes to competitive gaming. Aside from the violence, it could lead to emotional stress for students, upset parents or school officials, and, in extreme cases, the end of the program.

- The infrastructure
- A committed coach
- A space
- Funding
- District/School board approval and buy-in
- Student participation

You'll also need to make sure the technology is in place prior to beginning competitions. Holding an initial informational meeting can help program leaders determine how much processing power they might need based on how many students are interested. Then, there's the leadership side of things. Finding someone on the faculty (often a teacher, but perhaps an administrator) who has the time and the background knowledge of gaming is important. Once decided on, they typically spend some time working with school IT staff to acquire the proper equipment and ensure virtual safety.

From there, esports coaches can set meeting and practice times and, eventually, work with the principal or athletic director to find a league to join or set up matches with opponents from other schools. Creating an esports team or club at a school can take some time, but, as time goes on, you can learn so much about how to go about doing so and how to create these kinds of beneficial experiences for students.

If you've had discussions around your school or college about starting an informal or formal esports program, we can help. Our team can provide insight on additional strategies for recruiting players, starting a program, and creating a space. We can also provide consultation on the technology systems typically used in interscholastic esports and provide simplicity in purchasing this technology all in one place on our [store](#). If you would like to speak to somebody from our team regarding the launch of an esports program in your school, we encourage you to [get in touch](#).

Images: District Administration, VentureBeat, Burlington Public Schools, Nova Esports