



## Formative Evaluation of the Inaugural Season of the Orange County High School Esports League

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### Executive Summary

The research team at the Connected Learning Lab / Esports Research Lab at UC Irvine observed and interviewed student team members, coaches, and teachers (GMs) across Orange County, California, who participated in the inaugural season of the Orange County High School Esports League (January - April 2018). The endeavor was generally regarded as a success, especially given its short launch window and county-wide scale. Preliminary anecdotal and observational evidence suggests strong potential for participating students to learn across the domains of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), English and language arts (ELA), social and emotional learning (SEL), and various technical fields (ISTE), especially if educators make a concerted effort to amplify and organize this learning potential with specific, directed activities or lessons. Difficulty in coordinating and scheduling weekly matches, lack of preparation and training of GMs, a wide variety in coach quality and occasional nebulousness of coach role, getting appropriate tech and IT infrastructure in schools, and dealing with occasional unsportsmanlike behavior were major pain points.

### Introduction and Goals

The 2017-2018 school year saw the creation and inaugural season of the Orange County High School Esports League (OCHSEL) now renamed the North America Scholastic Esports League (NASSEL). Thirty-eight (38) teams from 25 Orange County (California) high schools competitively played the online multiplayer team battle arena game *League of Legends* in a “Swiss-system”-style weekly tournament from January 2018 to April 2018. Quarterfinals, semifinals, and championship matches were held the weekends of April 14 and April 28 live in person at the Esports Arena in Santa Ana. In *League of Legends*, players choose from over 100 different characters (“champions”) with which they comprise two teams of five in a capture-the-flag style online match. The game, a product of Santa Monica, CA-based Riot Games, had 100 million monthly players worldwide as of 2016 (Tassi, 2016) and has a strong professional circuit, with the 2017 World Championship counting 57.6 million viewers (Statista, 2018).

UC Irvine’s Connected Learning Lab and Esports Research Lab were engaged to conduct a formative evaluation of the League’s first season. The goal of formative evaluation is to *monitor an endeavor and provide feedback* that can be used for improvement. This is typically different from “summative evaluation,” which usually evaluates against a predefined benchmark (Scriven, 1967; Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence and Educational Innovation, Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.). Accordingly, our research questions were:

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- RQ1: What are major programmatic and operational successes and pain points in this first-year roll-out?
- RQ2: What are the existing and potential alignments between esports and learning?

In this report, we present our findings in terms of recommendations based on data collected through qualitative observation and interviewing with participating students, teachers functioning as General Managers (“GMs”), coaches, and parents.

## Methods

This evaluation derives its data from a combination of qualitative methods including on-site observations at high schools and championships, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups, either in person or online. Major fieldwork was conducted from December, 2017 through June, 2018. We conducted fieldwork at six (6) league-participating school sites, selected for maximum geographic, income, and racial/ethnic variation across Orange County. Within those six school sites, we gathered:

- Approximately 20 hours of field observations of OCHSEL teams/clubs
- Focus group interviews with participating students (n=39)

In addition to this fieldwork at school sites, we recruited league-wide for interviews with GMs and coaches, and recruited parents for interviews at the championship event. This resulted in:

- Focus groups with League GMs (n=11), including one Asst. Principal
- Focus groups with Coaches (n=5)
- Paired interviews with parents of participating students at the championship event (n=10)

We also observed one training meeting with League GMs in December 2017 and three online meetings with League leadership and their esports community advisory board. We present our recommendations in relation to each research question and organized by stakeholder category.

### ***RQ1: What are major programmatic and operational successes & pain points in this first-year roll-out?***

#### **League Schedule**

GMs, coaches, and students alike were impressed that the league materialized and delivered a full-fledged championship as quickly and professionally as it did; yet, all participant constituencies also expressed frustration with a very short runway and steep learning curve in this inaugural season. This is not to say that there was demand for actual league play to stretch on longer or to start earlier; rather, all groups of participants expressed a desire for more time to onboard GMs who may not be familiar with the game, to sort out technical issues with installing *League of Legends* and other software on computers and getting IT departments to sign off, and to cultivate student interest. League stakeholders should be aware of the shape of the life of today’s high school students: extracurriculars/after-school activities are chosen early in the school year and strategically, both in terms of future opportunity (such as college resume building) and in terms of what already exists and is popular at that particular school. In other words, students’ after-school lives are jam-packed and deciding what to devote one’s time to is a complex negotiation. One student at School 4 told us, “We missed out on recruitment, like a lot of people had already joined orchestra or other after-school stuff.”

This contributed to the most-often repeated pain point for GMs, coaches, and students: match scheduling. In this inaugural season, Wednesday afternoons were the default match time each week for competitive league play. However, many of the GMs and students we spoke with revealed that this rarely, if ever, was the actual time they played. This was due to a number of factors such as students having other commitments such as tennis or swimming or GMs not being communicative with other GMs in a timely fashion.

This was an inconvenience at best and resulted in contentious situations at worst. The GM at School 4, who felt they were quite accommodating of schedule changes, was peeved at a lack of reciprocity: “Why are we being so flexible on rescheduling when no one is flexible with us? Next time we won’t offer and they’ll just have to forfeit.” A GM at a non-field-site school told us that one week’s match scheduling communication exchange resulted in a student from the opposing team bad-mouthing them over Discord. GMs also told us that, when down to the wire, they would resort to email and phone to reschedule matches as they could not be sure that other GMs would check Discord regularly. Nevertheless, despite some awkward instances, GMs and other participants expressed general optimism and willingness to “put up” with this pain point because they understood that they were part of the inaugural season and organizational kinks needed to be worked out and they remained committed to students to make this happen on a weekly basis.

Several participants also wondered how the League could incorporate face-to-face time between competing schools at strategic points during the season, such as at launch, or with some sort of closure activity. As it was, several GMs were disappointed in the lack of closure throughout the league, even if their teams made it to the quarter-finals and championships.

#### Recommendations:

- Start cultivating and recruiting for League and club student involvement early in the school year.
- Establish not only one weekly match time but also two more dedicated alternate match times either League-wide or for each school so re-negotiations don’t have to happen every week. No Sunday play.
- Do not adhere to strict collegiate-level rules in terms of one week advance notice for team rosters and only one alternate. The rules should be a little more lax to appreciate the HS level of commitment. Allow more alternates and less advance roster time.
- End the season memorably for everyone. GMs reported let-down when semi-finals teams didn’t make it: “... And then what?”
- Use the club format to continue after-school engagement. At the majority of our six school field sites, student play and club activity (if applicable) dissipated after the regular season ended.

#### Competing Teams

Technical infrastructure for hosting *League of Legends* practices and weekly matches on school site after school varied widely. Functionally, first, the GM (school teacher) needed to find a room with

computers. Often this was their own room, as many were digital media production / computer teachers, but in some cases they were enthusiastic teachers who did not have access to computers and therefore partnered with a teacher who was in charge of some space with computers. Then, the GMs needed to get permission to install *League of Legends* on their school's computers as well as get permission to disable the IT firewall that hindered online play. Usually this was done at the district level. Some fortunate GMs were able to find allies in upper-level school administration to help convince district leadership to do so. Even if GMs convinced their school and district admin to install the game, this varied widely on the ground. School 1 only took down the firewall for 2.5 hours in the afternoon. They ended up going to a local game café to practice. School 2 mostly just practiced from home because computers were slow at school and their personal peripherals were better (see Equity section). Yet, another GM in our focus groups reported no issues at all.

Coaches, who are seasoned *League of Legends* players and who each coached teams at multiple schools, expressed frustration with the wide spectrum of quality of connection, computers, and peripherals at different sites. This ranged from slow ping rates to slow computers (and laptops) to low-quality peripherals. One coach described *League of Legends* as a “feel game,” meaning competitive-level players rely on body/muscle memory and the feel of very responsive keyboards and the like, which is why many competitive players bring their own peripherals to matches. This, combined with a lack of robust “club” infrastructure (see below), resulted in heavy momentum for several teams to move away from practicing at school and to practice and compete from home – in their eyes, the drawbacks to practicing on campus, co-located, outweighed the benefits.

The schools we observed varied widely in terms of pre-existing student proficiency in *League of Legends*. Some students on the teams at School 3 (at which 72% of the student body receives free or reduced price lunch) told us they didn't have PCs at home at all and that this season was the first time they had ever played *League of Legends*, doing so entirely at the school's computer classroom. Though they were upbeat in our focus group, they expressed frustration at constantly losing to better teams, which sometimes included behavior called “BM,” or “bad mouthing” or “bad manners,” in which the winning team would taunt the losers in-game. A GM at another, non-field site school, explained: “We were in the lower third so it got frustrating for the kids getting pounded by the higher teams so is there some thought process of trying to break into different leagues based on level like they do with academic decathlon and things like that where there's this group and this group and this group and just ways of making it more competitive within their level.”

Recommendations:

- Instruct GMs early, especially those who are hosting League play at their school for the first time, in best practices on gaining district-level access to games and open firewalls; do this as well for other game-related software such as Twitch and Discord.
- Instruct GMs in benchmark standards for technical specs in competitive play.
- Consider divisional play (V and JV) to balance out the experience for competing teams.

## Coaches

Coaching success varied widely. At School 2, with a GM with no game knowledge, the coach (who was also local) did heavy lifting on in-game training, met with the team in-person, and also helped

manage scheduling and even discipline. At another school with a game-knowledgeable GM, the coach (who was remote) was viewed as not very useful and the GM, who had preexisting experience with *League of Legends*, did a lot of training. Additionally, at least one school did not take advantage at first of the coaching opportunity, believing that their teams were already quite good and did not need that training component. That GM explained, “Looking back now, I wish I had taken more advantage of the workshops and the coaching. I originally came out of this kind of like, *We’ve already got our club and we’re not interested in a bunch of training or anything like that. We just want to play.*”

Generally, though, GMs and students were very thankful for the coaching experience. Since GMs were usually teachers who had little to no experience with *League of Legends* or other competitive videogames, the bulk of the teaching—of game-specific skills as well as socio-emotional skills such as teamwork and avoiding “tilt,” and communication skills—came from coaches. One student at School 4 told us, “I think [our coach] helped us to like, be more like introspective to like look at ourselves and try to see what we were doing incorrectly. He also like, helped us kind of control our own toxicity.” In focus group, coaches told us they did a lot of figuring out roles and responsibilities with school site GMs at the beginning of the League—sometimes both parties weren’t really sure what the other was supposed to be responsible for (such as scheduling and discipline/rule enforcement).

Recommendations:

- Clearly articulate and promote the role of the coach both to students as well as GMs and coaches themselves.
- Integrate coaches into play and practice earlier in the season in order to establish routines and team best practices.

## General Managers

GMs, across the board, expressed satisfaction and pride in completing this first season, as well as many frustrations in figuring out different moving parts as the League progressed. There is a strong call for more robust training and workshops for GMs as the League goes forward and new GMs potentially come onboard. General Managers occupy an interesting and complex position: they are high school teachers who may or may not have access to school computers or be familiar with the games in play; they are on-campus boosters of esports to sometimes skeptical fellow faculty and administration; they are coordinators of League play (including the onerous task of scheduling matches each week); they are disciplinarians (which is difficult when they are not familiar with the game at all, making it hard to know when codes of conduct or game-specific rules are broken). Additionally, they may or may not be the faculty advisor of the campus esports club – if one exists on campus.

We recommend a series of GM “best practices” training modules that touch on the following topics that various GMs brought up in focus group:

- Primer on Game Titles – GM: “I am trying to find another teacher to lead next year, one that is more familiar with the game.”
- Discord – GM: “Some people didn’t know how to use Discord”; GM: “Communication pathways were challenging to develop.”

- League Rulebooks – Student: “We didn’t know the whole [OCHSEL] rulebook. We thought a team did something weird and then they we’re like, ‘It’s in the rulebook!’”
- Best Practices for Promoting & Supporting – Recommendation from GM focus groups: Craft one or a series of meetings for GMs that focuses on nuts and bolts of the game and gathers best practices such as using morning announcements to promote team, etc.
- Simplify the paperwork process at the start of the year so GMs can responsibly track parent permissions.

## Clubs

Campus esports clubs were pre-existing, non-existent, or just getting started during this season’s play. Though the role of the club was not expressly articulated at the start of the League endeavor, we believe that it has great potential to intervene in issues of learning, equity, and continued engagement on campus with interested students. This is for several reasons. Clubs can provide a train-up function for students who are interested in potential competitive play but are not skilled enough to walk in the door and make the school’s team. They can be spaces where multiple games are played informally, wrapping more students into team-based play and subsequent socio-emotional and communication skills as well as increasing diversity across race/ethnicity, socioeconomics, and gender. It is a way to involve non-competing students in learning experiences such as shoutcasting, statistical analysis, publicity, and management. They can be the means for continuing to engage students before League play officially starts and after it concludes. Clubs are by definition student-led, which allows for more agency and requires students to collectively work to write a charter, elect officers, interface with the campus, and the like. The GM at School 1, for example, explained, “The jewel of all this would be the club itself, you know. Not all the kids are going to be able to compete so we’re working with a couple kids, five or six [on the team].” He went on to cite other clubs at his school, such as Key Club or National Honors Society as “juggernauts” on campus, meaning that they magnetize students and give them a reason to be invested in school – and he hoped that the esports endeavor could do the same. At some schools, clubs or sports even come with student elective credit units. Absent a robust club skeleton for students to step right into at the beginning of the year, we saw a pattern in which many students showed up for a primary info session, but fewer returned, citing a lack of familiarity or desire to play *League of Legends*, or even simply a lack of PCs for students other than team members.

### Recommendations:

- Clearly articulate the role, operation, and potential benefits of an esports club in a “starter kit.”
- Increase number and types of games supported in clubs. Increase number of student roles in clubs.
- Get equal status for esports clubs on school campuses.

## Workshops & Clinics

Over six weekends, UCI hosted a series of workshops on building one's own PC, analyzing and improving one's game, shoutcasting, streaming tournament planning and healthy gaming. Each three-hour workshop drew a group of approximately 13-20 students. Workshops were designed by the UCI esports Research Lab, organized by the OC Department of Education, and taught by esports professionals across the local industry (e.g. UCI team players, coaches, shoutcasters, arena staff) relevant to each week's topic. No formal assessments were used, but observations at the events indicated that students were most engaged with hands-on activities that allowed them to actively take part in the given esports activity and then receive feedback from an expert. For example, students were very receptive to receiving feedback on their play choices from the UCI collegiate team players and coach and were excited about shoutcasting over a match with an expert shoutcaster. This inaugural year, not all esports experts leveraged for the workshops were experienced or trained in working with high school youth; despite this variation in staffing teaching skill, workshops generally provided for increased opportunities for greater connection to STEM education and to other disciplinary in-school curricula.

Recommendations:

- Train visiting experts how to work with youth, including how to connect to kids, how to speak to our audience without sounding like school, and how to improvise without losing the core message.
- Build in assessment metrics. They can be used as opportunities to demonstrate and practice learning while serving as assessment points to share with schools as positive selling points for the league.

## **RQ2: What are the existing and potential alignments between the esports league and learning?**

### **Academic Outcomes**

There was strong preliminary anecdotal and observational evidence to suggest that League players approached or achieved nascent learning outcomes correlated to existing standards across science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM); English and language arts (ELA); and social and emotional learning (SEL; see following section). This evidence ranged from general improvements in communication skills and reasoned decision-making to area-specific technical skills. However, this learning was not consistent across all schools observed and only existed where there was strong support from GMs and coaches.

At several of our field sites we observed marked changes in how students on the competitive teams communicated in-game from the beginning of the season to the end. Students were much more communicative during game play by League's end, adopting proactive communication strategies of shotcalling and anticipatory analysis, support/morale statements, and self-prompted reflexive communal team analysis after a match concluded regarding what worked and what didn't. This evidence suggests potential for amplification and alignment to several core overlapping STEM and ELA standards, including: "Engage in argument from evidence"; "Construct viable arguments and critique reasoning of others"; and "Obtain, evaluate, and communicate information" (Chuek 2013). A student at School 2, when asked about what they thought they got out of playing in the League, explained: "I think communication. [Our coach] really stressed communication as a team, and then I think we've all improved on like communicating with each other, confidence with each other."

GMs also reported an increase in communication skills in their students and even an occasional increase in engagement in school and teacher-student bonding. One GM explained: “I’ve definitely seen them grow a lot over the course of the time I’ve met them because my first time meeting them was when they showed up to the meeting because I never had them as students except one of them. One that I’ve had as a student, she’s definitely blossomed a lot. Like she’s definitely more engaged in class... I feel like she’s definitely like becoming more active in class and just in general, like wanting to talk to me, definitely more like rapport, like I said, like a connection to myself and the students after this whole club had started, which is awesome.”

As well, we witnessed organic, unprompted efforts and ideas to develop knowledge in specific disciplinary STEM and ELA areas from educators bubbling up even without heavy scaffolding or direction from League leadership. We believe there is ample space here for much more structured alignment with standards-based learning across STEM, ELA, and technical education (ISTE). For example:

- At School 6, the GM tasked students with producing their own **website** for their school’s team.
- At School 1, the students have taken it upon themselves, with the support of their GM, to edit in-game video clips and **make mini movies for their school’s TV station**.
- At School 4, the GM and coach gave **homework assignments** on learning various champions’ strengths and weaknesses and reporting back, such as screencapping the game load screen and analyzing the pros and cons of team composition. Also, students decided on their own game-related topics for learning and **self-directed several lessons** (such as “improving your ‘creep score’”).
- One GM, who is a computer science teacher, commented: “The things that popped into my head include things like doing animations that could be incorporated in the games. Maybe creating a map, programming it, you know. We could **write patches for it or we could write mods** for the game. Just for what I teach, that’s what comes up.”
- The GM at School 1, who is in charge of digital production at his school, stated: “What about STEAM? There’s **so much art** in *League of Legends*.”
- *League of Legends* appears to encourage critical attention and analysis. One student at School 3 told us that the pick and ban process of choosing characters during the opening moments of a match translated directly into the kind of **communicative logic they use in class debates** elsewhere. Another student at School 3 explained, “Comparatively to like other games that I’ve played, I’ve never really analyzed a game more closely than I have with League. Mostly because of my coach.”

Recommendations:

- Invest in building out specific standards-based exercises and opportunities that span the scope of the club as well as potential curricular connections, leveraging the potential of interest-based learning to its fullest extent.
- Help students develop communication skills inside the game and out.

- Articulate to students and stakeholders such as school admin and parents that teamsmanship, SEL, and communication go hand in hand.

### **Social and Emotional Learning**

Students, GMs, and coaches gave us compelling testimony that student social and emotional learning occurred among team players as the season progressed. Key components of this learning aligned tightly with CASEL standards, including: self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, n.d.). One student at School 3 gave us his evaluation of how he changed over the course of the season: “I feel like me personally, like I’ve become a lot more calm as a person. I’ve learned to like, not get angry when you’re doing something or you or your team messes up. Before, I would be playing on console [not LoL] and I would get mad at myself if I was doing bad or something and now I’m like, *Oh, you know what, it’s a team game. I let down my team but at the end of the day they’re still ok.* I’ve learned a lot to just keep cool during the game and be ok with losing or winning.”

A student at School 4 had a similar reflection on what he learned from being on the competitive *League of Legends* team at his school: “I feel like you really need to understand how like, how another person would feel about their own mistakes and really say something in a nice way and not go so, you know, off the charts with it, and really get off like, *Hey, this would help* and this and that. Like, just be nice about it, and not just be like, *grr, you know.*” Another student at the same school on the team explained, “In the beginning of all this, I was like, if we lose like the game, I was like, *Okay, we lose because someone else falls.* Now, like, *Okay, we lose together, or we win together.* You know, like teamwork.” At the same time, students learned how to cope with “BM”: “bad-mouthing” or “bad manners” such as having in-game taunting or avatar dancing before landing a killing blow happened, and not to get “tilted” or overly upset. We believe there is strong potential to capitalize on this social and emotional learning and develop it even more.

Recommendations:

- Demonstrate how SEL skills impact in-game performance.
- Build good sportsmanship through teachable moments.
- Develop individual emotional regulation.

### **Parent Engagement**

Though we did not systematically interview parents for this formative evaluation, we did ask all student focus group participants about their parents’ opinions of their participation. We also approached parents who attended the championship events for short interviews on their opinions of their children’s participation. According to the students, their parents by and large ranged from resistant to simply bewildered at the idea of competitive videogaming. Some were outright hostile to the idea and the student had to artfully negotiate their involvement, guaranteeing certain amounts of time on homework or even just promising “that it wouldn’t get in the way of school.” Several students, however, reported that their parents’ skepticism eased during the course of the season, especially when they saw that the students themselves were happy, engaged, developing as teammates, or even not spending time outside in unsafe neighborhoods. Many of the parents we spoke to directly were excited about the potential of colleges awarding scholarships for esports.

A student at School 3 told us a story about how his dad, very resistant initially and who rarely conversed with him in general, opened up to him throughout the course of the season: “My dad’s like the man-man, your stereotypical guy, all buff, all sports, and I’m not really up to that. He was completely against technology. But I’ve opened my dad up a lot more to it. He’s starting to watch Let’s Plays now, in Spanish. I think it’s changed my relationship with my parents a lot. Most of the time he’d be watching sports and he wouldn’t start conversations with me, unless he needed to know something about his phone or something like that. And now it’s more like us conversing while watching those Let’s Plays, I’ve been introducing him to some YouTubers and things like that, showing him how Twitch works. I think we’ve been more connected, so-to-say.”

Recommendations:

- Message the potential benefits of competitive team esports play to parents during sign-up.
- Provide a role for participating parents that lets them witness and support their children’s engagement.

### **Relationships to School**

We were surprised when students and GMs told us about several potential ancillary school-related benefits they observed or experienced. Contrary to the assumption that videogames and school are oppositional, we heard testimony that, for some students, their involvement in the esports League acted as a motivator to be more engaged in school. For one, there is the simple requirement of reaching a GPA threshold to be eligible for League play. But also, GMs expressed the general sentiment of the League being able to reach and involve kids who would normally not be invested in school spirit, or things such as more traditional sports. One GM at a non-field-site school explained, “The simple fact that they wanted to be... They’re so excited about, ‘I’m going to compete today after school and I heard my name on the announcements and I’m tied into the school now.’ That gets them to show up. I think their attendance is going to go up. I think, you know, their investment in the entire school curriculum is going to go up.”

Two students at School 3 explained different viewpoints in focus group. One admitted that he was spending too much time after school on *League of Legends* on his own time (not League practice): “I think like I sort of had a mental talk with myself, like, *Hey, you’re letting your videogames like take over. I was like, That’s not good. So, yeah, I limit it to like two games a night or something like that.*” In response, another student explained that his involvement in the League actually motivated him to complete his homework ahead of schedule: “I feel like it kind of improved my schoolwork. After I got into esports I kinda started looking forward to it by the end of the day so I’d be like, *Well I finished all my classwork, I’ll finish my homework in class too. I feel like my schoolwork got better.*”

Recommendation:

- Investigate further the connections between the esports League and attendance, motivation, and homework, and build this proactively into League/club mission and messaging.
- Ensure clear messaging about balancing school priorities to all participants.

### **Equity**

We received great feedback on how esports enfranchised students who would not normally participate in sports or other extracurriculars on campus. But we also got feedback that those students who were drawn to *League of Legends*, specifically, were ones who were somewhat more academically engaged overall, could tackle the high learning curve, and who came through the door with home computer and internet access. We heard echoed several times the sentiment that the GM at School 1 told us early on: “*League of Legends* draws a certain kind of student.” A different GM in focus group, using similar language, said, “More games for next year would attract more or a even different type of kid.” This shorthand also refers to gender, with the overwhelming majority of competitive *League* players being male, and although we did not ask about it, this shorthand might also signal a desire for more diversity in terms of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. School 3, a low-income school, was ranked very low in *League* standings and, not coincidentally, was comprised of many kids who did not have *League of Legends* access or even computers at home and who were first introduced to the game during *League* play. This leads us to believe that a greater variety of games on offer would provide more opportunities to enfranchise a greater variety of students.

#### Recommendations:

- Leverage the club to increase access and equity. As a student at School 3 commented, on having a more robust club with more students involved: “I think it would create a better environment, not just for the team, but for everyone. You would get to talk to a lot more people. I feel like it would be a good way to be more social.”
- Open up the *League* to more and different types of games.
- Use the club to train up students who may be eager and talented but lack home resources, support, or pre-existing game training.

#### Conclusion

Participants we interviewed were very excited about the OCHSEL, proud to be involved in its inaugural season, and invested in growing it even more at their campuses in the next year. Participants dealt with first year logistical and sometimes interpersonal difficulties because they recognized that the *League* was something very new and held substantive benefits for the students. GMs especially went out of their way, staying after school with their teams, coordinating with other schools, setting up text message systems to make sure their teams were on the same page, and generally putting in a large chunk of manpower. They told us their number one reason for doing this was that they saw a palpable level excitement in their students, and as committed teachers, this was satisfying. They could also see the inklings of more durable rewards for the students, including increased teamwork, responsibility, and communication skills.

Our suggestions for improvement outlined here largely fall within three broad categories. All are aimed at formalizing and institutionalizing best practices, many of which spontaneously developed from site to site during this inaugural season:

1. Front-load staff training (GMs and coaches) early and clarify roles and expectations with best practices. Source this from first-year GMs and coaches. Lengthen the runway at the start of the school year so GMs and coaches feel more adequately prepared to deliver the best experience possible for their students.

2. Invest in establishing parallel esports club activity at school sites and provide clubs with scaffolding and activities and rationale throughout the school year. Clearly articulate roles for students, including leadership and ancillary activities, develop a symbiotic relationship between club play and League play, diversify game selection, and provide train-up support for students who may not be on their school's competitive teams.
3. Tightly align suggestions 1 and 2 above with standards in STEM, SEL, ELA, and ISTE, offering suggestions for concrete lessons and activities in both competitive team and club play and activity. Capitalize on educators' innate drive to make play a learning opportunity by providing them with concrete exercises and ancillary lessons and tasks to amplify student learning potential.

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**CITRUS GLADE HIGH SCHOOL: A WINNING CASE**

Thunderous cheers erupted as live close-ups of Citrus Glade High School's<sup>1</sup> team members' faces flashed across the wall-sized LCD screen at the Santa Ana Esports Arena for the first time. They were about to start their first playoff match of the day, and Citrus Glade's five-person team was on stage, each at their own computer station, lined up in a row facing the audience. As each new skirmish with the opposing team materialized on screen, the crowd roared with anticipation.

While the inaugural season of the OCHSEL saw a lot of excitement across Orange County schools, we observed that the actual execution of League practice and play varied immensely from campus to campus and district to district. In many cases, school site leadership simply didn't know how to think of esports as a high school endeavor. Some GMs told us that they received doubt and even hostility to the idea of esports on their campus. Citrus Glade stood out as a campus that embraced the endeavor warmly, and school officials told us that the esports endeavor has connected various groups of students better to their campus (which, incidentally, had to recently cancel its second dance of the year due to poor ticket sales), especially students who would otherwise be disconnected from campus life. Citrus Glade is not in an affluent community; over 70% of the student body receives free or reduced price lunch. One assistant principal called their school's esports program "a huge success" that's wrapped into the campus community "different kids I've never even seen before."

We were curious: How did Citrus Glade teachers, administrators, and students achieve such high buy-in? The answer: They had practice, resources, and administrative support.

Earlier in the school year, before OCHSEL had officially launched, a different, statewide athletics organization reached out to various schools to ask if they wanted to hold exhibition tournaments for esports on campus. This email worked its way through the administration at Citrus Glade and found a booster in the Activities Director, who passed it on to the Assistant Principal who was in charge of tech pathways. Sensing that they would have student buy-in, they coordinated with a computer

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym. Citrus Glade HS was not one of our six observational school sites; we obtained information through post-season interviews with GMs and admin.

science teacher (who generally worked closely with that Assistant Principal due to her subject area), to hold this exhibition tournament of *League of Legends*. They tapped into an active student body leadership to recruit and publicize. The student representatives did “roomarounds” explaining the exhibition, and students self-organized into teams. Over 30 teams self-organized, which were whittled down to 24 – these teams ended up competing in a playoff structure within the school during the fall semester.

The Assistant Principal was instrumental in getting district IT leadership to approve the installation of the program and the removal of the firewall for after school team practice and streaming. Initially, they held and streamed matches in classrooms after school, but by the semifinals and finals, they were live-streaming the matches in the school’s cafeteria, with over 100 students spectating. One official remembered, “They got super loud, to the point where other teachers who didn’t know what was going on were like, why is there so much energy in this cafeteria right now?”

This infrastructure and knowledge was already in place by the time OCHSEL launched, which made it easy for the GMs to self-nominate and also select their best teams with the help of their new OCHSEL coach. All the tech specs had been worked out, and more importantly, the campus community already understood what esports was and what it meant to the students – and there was buy-in from the top-down. The GMs were thankful for this, as well as for their dedicated coach, whose guidance improved their team play and communication skills dramatically.

The excitement on campus was palpable. As evidence, one GM told us that at their winter athletics pep rally, the captains of each athletics team came out one at a time, with the esports team captain receiving more enthusiastic applause than any other team captain, even football.

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