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esports

Kentucky among first to offer esports

Program can be started with existing computers, minimal start-up cost

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By Matt McCarty
Staff writer

In homes across America, high school students can be found playing video games either online or on a game console. Now in several states, including Kentucky, students are playing these games competitively as part of their high school's esports team.

Boyle County High School was one of 13 schools to compete



in last fall's Season Zero of esports in Kentucky.

Boyle County High School won Kentucky's first esports state championship last fall after the sport was sanctioned by the Kentucky High School Athletic Association (KHSAA), the governing body of Kentucky high school sports.

"Esports is a new way to get kids involved at their school that maybe weren't involved in anything previously," said Joe Angolia, KHSAA communications director. "We're just trying to find new ways to get kids involved that aren't necessarily going to be football or basketball players, but now they're able to represent their school and get involved in their school community."

Kentucky was one of six states to compete in last fall's inaugural Season Zero playing "League of Legends." This spring, schools are competing in Season One with 15 states competing either as a sanctioned sport or as a club. Schools can compete in the games "Rocket League" and "Smite" in addition to "League of Legends."

Esports appeals to both students who might be involved in other sports but might not excel at them and to students who aren't involved in any sports, said Boyle County esports coach Damian Laymon.

“This gives those kids who a lot of times live their lives on the computer, it gives them something to be a part of on the school team,” he said. “The only thing I’ve just been telling people who’ve been hesitant about (starting a team), we were able to engage a student group that many times doesn’t get engaged in student activities. And I think that’s probably the biggest benefit of something like this. Getting those kids involved in something they’re proud of and they can succeed at.”

The number of Kentucky schools competing this spring has tripled from last fall with 38 schools now participating. Schools that sign up can have an unlimited number of teams, Angolia said.

Wolfe County High School esports coach Timothy Evans said he expects participation to continue to grow. As schools join, he said it’s important for coaches to be fully invested in working with the program and to have buy-in from administrators.

“It can’t be done unless you have the full support of your principal, technology director, board of education, everybody,” he said, “because if somebody thinks it’s silly or they don’t want to go along with it, they kind of hinder your ability to run the program. Then it’s going to stop in its tracks.”

‘Already a win’

Evans said his school treats esports like any other sport, even purchasing jerseys.

“I told them we’re going to be legitimate, we’re going to be treated like an

actual sport, like every other sport,” he said. “That means you have to have grade checks once a month. You cannot be failing any classes. If you get in trouble, if you get suspended, if you get alternative, you’re kicked off the team. You have to represent Wolfe County with respect, with professionalism.”

When two students who were failing a couple of classes signed up for the team last fall, Evans told them if they raised their grades they could join this spring.

“At least once a week they’d swing by and say, ‘Mr. Evans, I’m working so hard, I’m staying for tutoring. I’m going to get the passing grade, so I can join esports in the spring.’ Sure enough, both of them came to me and gave me their (grade check form). The teachers had signed off. They were passing all their classes,” he said. “To me, that was already a win at our school because we got at least two students to pass classes because of esports.”

Startup cost

Wolfe County started the program last fall with no budget. The students used existing computers in the school’s computer lab and there is no travel until the final round of the playoffs.

The team then raised almost \$1,000 to buy a headset, mechanical keyboard, steel series mouse and mousepad for 10 players. This spring, the team raised more than \$3,000 to buy several gaming PCs.

“We ordered the parts and we had just an awesome tech day where all of our esports guys and gals got together and we built gaming PCs,” Evans said. “It was a great learning experience for them.”

While a school can use older computers and start the program with no budget, both coaches said the better the computer is, the better it will run

the games.

“That does give you a competitive edge or an equal footing if you’re playing another good team,” Evans said. “All the other stuff (such as headsets) just adds to the experience.”

Each student pays a \$64 fee per season for each game in which they compete.

During Season Zero, Boyle County students used computers the school already had and didn’t really have any



expenditures, Laymon said.

“We were planning on doing some computer upgrades anyway so going into the (spring) season we have some better computers to use,” he said, noting one of the new games for the spring is more graphics-intensive and requires

better computers. “So, moving forward, especially with the success that we’ve had, it’s gotten a little attention and I think we’re really going to try to invest in it in the coming year.”

Boyle County High School won the first Kentucky esports state championship last fall at Martha Layne Collins High School in Shelby County. (Photo courtesy of Boyle County Schools)

It’s an investment that could pay off in academics and with college scholarships.

“In the week after that championship I had contact from three different college coaches that were interested in recruiting some of our players and they said there was scholarship money available so that was something I had never even considered when we started this,” Laymon said.

Evans said he has also been in contact with coaches from several colleges and two of his players have been offered scholarships.

And having participated in esports, Evans said some of his players have been inspired to pursue a technology career.

“I don’t know if that will be web development or computer programming. I can just tell that some of these kids have changed from September of 2018 until now. Their eyes have been opened to technology. They thought it was cool before and now they understand it. They understand how computers work,” Evans said. “It’s definitely impacted our school in a huge way.”

Board view: Computers ‘are the way the world is going’

Last fall, Wolfe County school board member Danny Linkous received a surprising email. Some people in South Africa had sent him a video of them watching Wolfe County High School students playing an esports match.

Linkous also recalled that a former Wolfe County student sent the district's superintendent a message about the school's esports program.

"He was reading about it on the internet in Nashville about the growth of esports and Wolfe County being mentioned," Linkous said.

Linkous, who hadn't heard of esports prior to Wolfe County starting a competitive team, said watching some of the matches in person convinced him that adding the sport was a good idea.

"I don't know what they were doing, but they were having as much fun as any other kid doing any other sport," he said.

Linkous said the program not only gives students another extracurricular option, but it will also be beneficial after they graduate.

"Computers and stuff are the way the world is going," he said. "Our whole school board, we support about anything that keeps our kids in school and keeps them involved. That's another tool in the toolbox that they can use to help our kids further their life."

The district used existing computers and fundraising to get the program going.

"The way times are, you have to watch every dollar. Some of these sports, like esports, the schools are not out a lot of money to have esports teams," Linkous said. "Even if there are costs, if it keeps kids in school and off drugs, if we can get them into college or vocational school or some kind of trade, it's a cheap way to help our kids.

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