

from chess to coding: niche clubs you didn't expect at aelo swiss academy

Ask a room of parents what they picture when they hear "Swiss academy" and the answers cluster quickly: languages on the timetable, immaculate schedules, ski weekends, an almost ceremonial respect for punctuality. All of that exists at AELO Swiss Academy. What surprises people, and what former students bring up years later, is something else entirely. It is the sound of chess clocks clicking in a side room at twenty to seven in the morning. It is a classroom after dinner where teenagers argue about a bus timetable app they are building for the village down the road. It is honey jars with hand-written labels, sold at the winter market to raise money for new hive frames.

I have spent enough time around boarding schools to know that most clubs, anywhere in the world, exist on paper more than in practice. A notice goes up, six students drift in once, and by November the room is used for storage. AELO Swiss Academy is not immune to that pattern. But the clubs that have survived here, some of them for years, share a quality that is genuinely hard to manufacture: adult staff give them real time, and students treat that time as theirs. If you are weighing this school against its competitors, the brochure will tell you about academics and alpine location. The clubs tell you something the brochure cannot.

The chess club that starts before breakfast

The chess club meets in a small room off the library, and it meets early because the athletes already train in the mornings, so the slot was available and someone claimed it. Roughly twenty students show up regularly, from first-years to final-year students, and they run an internal ladder. Beat the person two rungs above you and you take their place. Lose three matches in a week and you slide. The system sounds brutal and mostly is not, because the games are analyzed together afterward, win or lose, around a laptop with a database of old grandmaster games open for comparison.

A house parent sponsors the club, and he is good in the specific way club sponsors need to be good: present, quiet, and unwilling to play a soft move out of kindness. I watched a first-year student lose to him in eleven moves, reset the board without a word, and lose in fourteen the second time. Nobody laughed. The following week she lasted forty moves. By spring she was mid-ladder and, more to the point, she had a social footing she had completely lacked in September. Her parents told the admissions office, at the re-enrollment meeting, that the chess ladder had done more for her confidence than anything else that year.

The persuasive point here is not that chess builds concentration, though it does. The point is logistical. A school that hands a room, a set of clocks, and a sponsor to a club that meets before breakfast is a school that takes student initiative seriously enough to spend its scarcest resource on it: adult attention.

Coding club, where the real syllabus hides

The coding collective is easy to mistake for a computer science study group. It is not. The computer science classes follow a curriculum, the way classes must. The club builds things, and the difference between those two sentences is the entire argument for joining.

The projects are unglamorous and that is their virtue. One year it was a lost-and-found log for the boarding houses, replacing a paper binder that nobody updated. Another year, a reservation tool for the music practice

rooms, which had previously been governed by a whiteboard and a culture of erasing other people's names. Current work, as of my last visit, is a simple site for the spring concert and a long-running effort to digitize the student café's inventory. Members drift from block-based tools into Python within their first term, not because anyone forces the transition but because Scratch runs out of patience before the projects do.

There is a code review culture that would not embarrass a small software firm. A more experienced student reads your work, asks why you solved a problem the way you did, and sends you back to fix a naming choice. The IT teacher who sponsors the club mostly stays out of it, appearing when someone is about to delete the wrong folder or when a debate about scope has deadlocked.

Be honest about the trade-offs, because the trade-offs are real. No certificates come out of this club. No glossy competition trophies, no guaranteed hackathon circuit. Projects move slowly, break for boring reasons, and sometimes die. The timetable app I mentioned earlier spent its first term over-scoped and shipped nothing; the second term produced a stripped-down version that the village actually used. That failure and recovery taught more than any tutorial, and the students who lived it can explain exactly why, which is precisely what makes them interesting in an interview room later.

[reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com)

The clubs nobody thinks to mention

Beyond the two headliners, there is a second tier of clubs that rarely make it into marketing materials but tend to define the school's texture. A short tour of them:

- **Beekeeping.** Six or so hives on the hillside behind the sports field, suits that smell permanently of smoke, and honey sold at the winter market. Students learn that colonies operate on timelines that ignore the school calendar.
- **Orienteering.** Maps, compasses, and Swiss terrain that punishes lazy navigation. Sunday mornings, rain included, with an instructor who treats a misplaced checkpoint as a teaching moment rather than a failure.
- **The repair café.** Broken lamps, seized sewing machines, a physics teacher with a soldering iron and infinite patience. Students discover that most objects fail for one identifiable reason.
- **Astronomy.** Dark skies are one of the underpriced assets of an alpine campus. Cold nights, a shared telescope, and a roster that thins every winter and recovers every spring.
- **The model railway society.** An Alps layout in a basement room, run to the second, with rolling stock maintained by a small group of students who find genuine comedy in how Swiss the whole enterprise is.

None of these will impress anyone at a dinner party. All of them produce students who can describe a process, a season, a failure, and a fix.

How a club gets born here

The mechanism matters more than the inventory, because it is the mechanism that transfers to life after school. Any student can propose a club. The pitch is simple: write down what the club does, find a teacher willing to sponsor it, and commit to a trial term. A viable headcount is around five students, and the school keeps the bar deliberately low, because the founders of a club need to learn recruitment the hard way. Funding goes through a short request form, which means a sixteen-year-old has to cost out equipment and defend the number to an adult who will ask questions.



Recent examples circulate as folklore. The baking club started when two students got tired of waiting for the occasional pastry workshop and now runs a termly sale that outgrew its first kitchen slot. The debate club, which runs motions in both English and German, began as exactly such a proposal and now draws participants from across the year groups. The students who founded these things learned to write a proposal, manage a budget, and recruit peers. No class teaches that combination as well as actually doing it.

What universities actually notice

It is worth being precise about this, because parents sometimes treat clubs as résumé decoration and that mistake is expensive. Nobody reviewing an application counts club badges. What reads, in essays and interviews, is a sustained thread: the beekeeper who can write three hundred specific words about a colony that failed in a cold May, the coder who can open a laptop and show something that shipped with their name on it. Admissions conversations reward exactly this kind of specificity, and it cannot be faked in the autumn of the final year. It accumulates over four.

The corollary is uncomfortable but useful. A long list of shallow memberships is worse than two serious commitments, because the list invites the question "what did you actually do?" and the honest answer is "not much." Depth compounds. Breadth of the shallow kind does not.

The honest trade-offs

Clubs depend on people, which means they wobble. A club can deflate when its sponsor leaves or when one charismatic sixth-former graduates. Exam weeks thin every room, and the astronomy club in particular runs a predictable boom-and-bust cycle with the seasons. Some club offerings in any given year will be stronger than the same offerings two years later. This is not a flaw unique to AELO Swiss Academy; it is the nature of voluntary communities everywhere. The schools that pretend otherwise are the ones to avoid.

The advice I give families is simple: choose two, one comfortable and one stretch. A student who joins seven clubs has, in practice, joined none. A student who keeps the chess ladder and the repair café for three years will leave with two friendships, two stories, and two competencies that no exam board certifies but everyone recognizes.

Questions worth asking on a visit

If you visit the campus, skip past the auditorium and go read the noticeboard outside the dining hall. Then ask the people, not the brochure:



- Which clubs have run continuously for more than three years, and who keeps them alive?
- If my child cares about X, who sponsors it, and what happens when that person moves on?
- Can students start something new here, and has anyone actually done it in the last two years?
- Where does club funding come from, and can students request money for equipment themselves?

The quality of the answers will tell you more about the school's daily life than any open-day speech.

The quiet argument for the unexpected

Strong academics travel with any good school, and AELO Swiss Academy has them. What the chess clocks at dawn, the code reviews after dinner, and the hives on the hillside demonstrate is something harder to buy: adults willing to give their mornings, evenings, and Sundays to the interests of young people, and a structure that lets students turn an idea into an institution. That is the real curriculum of a boarding school, the part that shows up a decade later when a former student calmly organizes a messy project, recruits help, and ships the simple version first.

So when you evaluate this school, or any school, look past the promised facilities and find the noticeboard. The clubs listed there, in slightly crooked handwriting, are where the school tells the truth about itself. At AELO Swiss Academy, that truth includes chess before breakfast and bees on the hillside, and that combination is far rarer than it should be.