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The Active Schools Movement: Helping to Create Comprehensive School Physical Activity Programs in All K-12 Schools

CHARLENE BURGESON

Let's Move! Active Schools

Physical activity has many health, social, and academic benefits for youth (United States Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2008). It can help children and adolescents improve cardiorespiratory fitness, build strong bones and muscles, maintain a healthy weight, reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, and reduce the risk of developing health conditions such as obesity, Type II diabetes, and other chronic diseases. Additionally, students who are physically active tend to have better school attendance, classroom behaviors, cognitive performance, and grades (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018).

The 2008 U.S. *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* recommended that children and adolescents aged 6 to 17 years should have 60 minutes (1 hour) or more of physical activity each day (USDHHS, 2008). Yet, only 22% of 6-19-year-olds in the United States (U.S.) participate in 60 minutes or more of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity on at least five or more days per week (National Physical Activity Plan Alliance, 2016).

Schools have a unique opportunity to support children's health and well-being because children spend so much of their time at school. In *Educating the Student Body: Taking Physical Activity and Physical Education to School*, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) recommended that district and school administrators, teachers, and parents should advocate for and create a whole-of-school approach to physical activity. The approach should foster and provide access in the school environment to at least 60 minutes per day of vigorous or moderate-intensity physical activity more than half (> 50%) of which should be accomplished during regular school hours (IOM, 2013). The purpose of this editorial is to introduce the reader to the need for and components of a Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program (CSPAP) as well as strategies being implemented by the Active Schools movement to increase CSPAPs in K-12 schools and how individuals, schools, and organizations can become involved in the Active Schools movement.

The Framework for Active School Environments

ASCD, formerly known as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model includes physical education and physical activity as one of its ten components (ASCD and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). It promotes opportunities for students to be physically active before, during, and after school, and the policies and practices that support those opportunities.

A CSPAP is a framework for planning and organizing activities for physical education and physical activity (CDC, 2017). It can help schools be strategic in addressing this aspect of the WSCC model. The goal of a CSPAP is to increase physical activity opportunities before, during, and after school and to increase students' overall physical activity and health (CDC, 2017). The five components of the CSPAP framework are: (a) quality physical education, (b) physical activity during school, (c) physical activity before and after school, (d) staff involvement, and (e) family and community engagement. The components below are defined from CDC's *Increasing Physical Education and Physical Activity: A Framework for Schools* (CDC, 2017).

Quality Physical Education

Physical education is a K-12 academic subject that provides standards-based curricula and instruction that is part of a well-rounded education. Quality physical education is designed to develop the knowledge and behaviors for physical activity, physical fitness, and motor skills in students. It serves as the foundation for equipping students to be physically active in other areas of school and beyond.

Physical Activity During School

Physical activity during school includes classroom physical activity and recess. Classroom physical activity includes any physical activity done in the classroom (e.g., stretching, jumping, dancing) during the school day. Recess is a regularly scheduled period within the school day for physical activity and play that is monitored by trained staff and volunteers.

Physical Activity Before and After School

Physical activity before and after school provides opportunities for students to be physically active and practice what they have learned in physical education. Activities might include walking or biking to and from school, physical activity clubs, intramural programs (i.e., sports organized by the school or community in which any child can participate), interscholastic sports (i.e., competitive sports between schools), and physical activity in before-school and after-school extended day programs.

Staff Involvement

Staff involvement means that school staff members serve as positive role models for wellness and integrate physical activity into classroom instruction and breaks. It also means that staff members support recess, clubs, intramural programs, and other physical activity offerings. Schools can also provide employee wellness programs to encourage physical activity among school staff.

Family and Community Engagement

Family and community engagement in physical activity means that parents, school staff, and community members work together to increase physical activity opportunities before, during, and after the school day. Family and community members can also work with schools to promote opportunities for physical activities inside and outside of the school building. Community organizations can establish shared-use agreements with schools that allow them to use school facilities for physical activity opportunities or events.

Schools can use the CDC's *Comprehensive School Physical Activity Programs: A Guide for Schools* to engage in a step-by-step process to develop, implement, and evaluate a CSPAP. The process helps schools develop a yearly plan for physical education and physical activity that they can implement and evaluate. In addition, the CSPAP framework, as a whole or as individual components, can be included in local wellness policies and school improvement plans to further support and provide guidance on school physical education and physical activity policies and practices.

The Status of Active School Environments

The current state of youth participation in physical activity, and schools' provision of active school environments, is well below the national guidelines for each, respectively. The only regularly conducted, national surveillance of youth health risk behaviors, the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), provides data representative of students in grades 9-12 in public and private schools throughout the U.S. That data revealed that less than half (49%) of high school students participated in at least 60 minutes of physical activity on five days or more of the week while only 27% participated in that amount of physical activity on all seven days. Additionally, 14% of high school students did not participate in at least 60 minutes of physical activity for even one day of the week. In regard to high school physical education classes, only 30% of students attended physical education classes on all five days of the week and just over half (52%) attended physical education classes on one or more days of the week (CDC 2015a).

Worse yet, the trends of the past five to 25 years (depending on the data point) show no improvement or rather, a decrease in youth participation in physical activity – more specifically, in physical education during school. This means that the problem on youth inactivity has not been improving. For the three data points about youth physical activity participation referenced above, there has been no statistically significant change from 2011 to 2015. Regarding participation in physical education classes, for the data point of all five days of the week, there has been no change since 1991. For the data point of one or more days of the week, there was a decrease from 1991 to 1995 and then no change from 1995 to 2015 (CDC, 2015a).

CDC's School Health Policies and Programs Study (SHPPS) provides nationally representative data for elementary, middle, and high schools. Similar to YRBS data, SHPPS showed us that youth are not getting enough physical education. For kindergarten through fifth grade, 43-47% of schools required physical education in each grade; for the middle school grades of 6-8, 26-34% of schools required physical education in each grade; for the high school grades of 9-12, is 9-21% of schools required physical education in each grade. From SHPPS we also know that only 22% of schools provided a specific time for school-wide physical activity outside of physical education class (e.g., during morning announcements), 55% of students participated in regular physical activity breaks outside of physical education during the school day, and 55% of schools offered opportunities for students to participate in physical activity clubs or intramural sports programs. The only bright spot is elementary school recess, where 91-95% of schools provided daily recess in kindergarten through fifth grade (CDC, 2015b).

The National Movement for Active School Environments

On February 28, 2013, former first lady Michelle Obama launched *Let's Move!* Active Schools as part of her larger *Let's Move!* initiative, providing an unprecedented national platform for the importance of school physical education and physical activity (The White House, 2013). Now called Active Schools, the independent and non-partisan national movement is dedicated to ensuring that at least 60 minutes a day of physical education and before, during, and after school physical activity is the norm in K-12 schools across the U.S. – because Active Kids Do Better (Active Schools, 2018).

Active Schools operates based on the collective impact framework designed to tackle deeply entrenched and complex social problems based on the belief that no single policy, government agency, organization, or program can solve them alone (Hanleybrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012). The movement is using an innovative and structured approach to collaboration among nonprofit organizations, business, philanthropy, government, and citizens to achieve significant and lasting

change. Active Schools convenes partner organizations to work towards a common agenda, aligned efforts, and shared measurements.

The movement engages individuals as Active Schools champions to support their local schools and influence policy and decision-making at the school and district levels. Champions include parents, principals, physical education teachers, classroom teachers, other school staff, community organizations, public health and medical professionals, and other community members. Currently, there are 35,919 enrolled champions affiliated with over 23,000 schools that serve more than 13 million students, located in all 50 states and the District of Columbia (Active Schools, 2018).

During conceptualization of the *Let's Move!* Active Schools initiative in 2012, representatives of leading school physical education and physical activity organizations tapped into research and experience and identified three key insights that informed the initial objectives and activities of *Let's Move!* Active Schools. Those insights were: (a) the differences between schools that provide an active school environment and those that do not, typically boils down to the existence of a champion, (b) schools are generally under-resourced to deliver physical education, but culture is probably a bigger issue when it comes to physical activity overall, and (c) teachers and administrators are extremely busy and need information about resources and opportunities to be streamlined.

Four years later, building on successes and lessons learned from 2013-2016, and in preparation for the end of the *Let's Move!* initiative, but continuation of *Let's Move!* Active Schools work, an in-depth strategic planning process was conducted from October 2016-March 2017. A set of principles emerged to guide the next phase of what was now being called the Active Schools movement.

Those guiding principles are: (a) every student has the right to at least 60 minutes of physical activity each school day, (b) every school has the responsibility to provide students with at least 60 minutes of physical activity each school day, (c) Active Schools is a national movement using the collective impact framework to accomplish policy, systems, and environmental change that cannot be accomplished by individual organizations, (d) kids are at the center of the Active Schools movement, (e) the movement will empower, train, and celebrate adults who enable active school environments, (f) the movement will change the public narrative about school physical education and physical activity, and (g) the movement will strengthen the school physical education and physical activity field.

Active Schools' Goals and Strategies

Moving forward with a strategic plan for 2017-2020, Active Schools' vision is to reimagine school environments to provide opportunities for academic, social, emotional, and physical learning so that all children have the ability, confidence, and desire to lead active, healthy lives and reach their full potential (Active Schools, 2017). The goal of Active Schools is to make it easier for schools to provide active school environments in their current reality while driving education policy, systems, and environmental change to create a new and better reality for schools to provide active school environments.

Active Schools' current strategic objectives are: (a) improved supply of active school environments to fulfill unmet need and provide proof points throughout the country, (b) increased demand for active school environments such that public education systems feel positive pressure to provide physical education and physical activity, and (c) reduced constraints to active school environments that unlock resources, yield favorable public policy, and produce educators who can effectively integrate physical activity into classrooms and the school day (Active Schools, 2017).

To meet these objectives, eight specific strategies are being planned and implemented by Active Schools: (a) serve as the hub for active school environments, (b) serve as the go-to voice on

active schools environments, (c) curate, enhance and repackage the evidence base, (d) increase public will for active school environments, (e) influence current teachers practice (both physical education and classroom teachers), (f) influence new teacher practice (both physical education and classroom teachers), (g) support policy and advocacy efforts, and (h) mobilize new allies and resources (Active Schools, 2017).

The Active Schools movement is uniquely positioned to implement these strategies and achieve its goal because it is a collaborative of 90 partner organizations committed to collective impact (Active Schools, 2018). In short, the movement is powered by: (a) leveraging partners' programs, services, assets, and networks to improve supply and also increase demand for and reduce constraints on active schools environments, (b) empowering partners to engage around key strategic objectives and contribute and interact with each other via a new framework and structure, and (c) engaging new allies that work on physical education and physical activity and connected causes (e.g., public health, whole child education, social and emotional learning) and in related fields (e.g., healthcare providers, insurance, sporting goods, retail, professional leagues, technology) (Active Schools, 2017).

All students need and deserve a CSPAP provided by their school. A comprehensive program requires the support and involvement of many. The Active Schools movement is designed to help individuals, schools, and organizations implement the CSPAP components and Active Schools strategies outlined in this editorial. The Active Schools movement is open to all who believe that Active Kids Do Better and want to make active school environments a reality in our nation's schools. Becoming an Active Schools champion is free, easy, and quick. To learn more and get involved, visit www.activeschoolsus.org.

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