



STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE

The Physical Education Teacher as School Activity Director

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Physical educators' knowledge and training qualify them to play a leading role in promoting school wellness.

Nearly half of youths between the ages of 12 and 21 are not vigorously active on a regular basis (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). If the educational setting is to play a role in meeting national health objectives for youths, the school environment needs to promote opportunities for physical activity. Hence, the purpose of this article is to help physical education teachers to start a comprehensive physical activity program that reflects effective teaching practices, such as increased engagement during physical education and student accountability, and that emphasizes contemporary practices such as instant activity, modified games, active recess, intramurals, drop-in activity periods, and participation in school wellness initiatives.

Physical Activity and Youths

Regular engagement in physical activity presents a wealth of benefits to those who participate (Strong et al., 2005). Some of these benefits are immediate while others occur over time. Unfortunately, today's children and adolescents generally fail to meet the national physical activity recommendation to participate in at least 60 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2004; President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, 2005). This is alarming because physical inactivity contributes to high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and type 2 diabetes, and it is related to the onset of other precursors to metabolic syndrome and cardiovascular disease.

Youths who regularly participate in physical activity are more likely to have normal body weight, an improved self-concept, and perhaps even higher levels of physical fitness (i.e., muscular strength) (Strong et al., 2005). More important, childhood physical activity has the potential to continue into adulthood, thus improving the quality of life and limiting the prevalence of risk factors related to serious diseases in later life (Janz, Dawson, & Mahoney, 2000).

Recently, several studies have demonstrated positive relationships between cognition and both physical activity (Coe, Pivarnik, Womack, Reeves, & Malina, 2006; Shephard, 1997; Sibley & Etnier, 2003; Tomporowski, 2003) and physical fitness (Castelli, 2005; Castelli, Hillman, Buck, & Erwin, in press; Hillman, Castelli, & Buck, 2005). Furthermore, children who meet the *Healthy People 2010* guidelines for vigorous activity may do better in school (Coe et al., 2006). Therefore, it is important to realize that the rate of physical activity engagement and maintenance of physical fitness may not only have valuable health benefits, but may enhance academic performance in school.

Becoming the Physical Activity Director

Efforts to maximize physical activity opportunities in the schools must be thoughtfully planned and coordinated. Physical educators are ideally positioned to address

issues of physical inactivity during the school day because they understand the school environment, parents, community, correlates of physical activity, and (most important) the unique characteristics of youth. From this perspective, it should be the responsibility of the physical education teacher, in conjunction with others, to offer physical activity opportunities that are integrated into multiple aspects of the school curriculum.

By taking a more comprehensive role in the coordination of physical activity opportunities during and even beyond the school day, the teacher would act as the director of physical activity. This is not to suggest that the physical educator must be at all events, coordinate every activity, or provide other teachers with the curriculum they need to get children moving; it simply means that the physical educator would oversee the school's physical activity program and coordinate its efforts. It would place the physical educator in a position of prominence, making him or her less isolated and more influential within the overall school environment. Three key steps to help the physical educator transition to the role of the physical activity director are described below.

Step One. The first step to becoming the physical activity director is to join the school wellness team. By now, most schools should have a school wellness team that has worked to develop an initial school wellness policy. In many cases, the physical education teacher has already collaborated in the implementation of the wellness policy. If not, it is never too late to start. Because wellness policies are living documents that will continually evolve, the physical educator can ask to be appointed to the school wellness policy team.

Once the teacher is a member of the team, he or she should help to define the role and responsibilities of the physical activity director and develop a Physical Activity Committee (PAC). The PAC's function is to plan physical activity events, keep the wellness committee informed, and establish an ongoing dialogue with the school's administration. Ideally, the extra responsibilities assumed by the physical activity director should be reflected by such things as an appropriately reduced course load to enable successful enactment of the wellness program.

Creating a school PAC will help to make physical activity a priority of the entire school instead of the responsibility of a single person. The committee should include other teachers, administrators, parents, and members of the community, such as public safety officers, who may have a stake in the program. The PAC functions as a collaborative team, cutting across many aspects of a child's life, and thus increasing the likelihood that students will choose to engage in physical activity. The PAC should encourage students to take part in events like ACES (All Children Exercising Simultaneously) and the "Walk to School Week" initiative. In many cases, the PAC will be an extension of the wellness team and will work to develop long-term goals for the program. In particular, the PAC will aide the physical activity director in distributing the human and fiscal resources necessary for a successful, comprehensive, in-school physical activity program.

Step Two. The second step is for the physical activity director to model high physical activity engagement by evaluating his or her teaching performance during physical education. At a minimum, his or her students should spend at least 50 percent of physical education class time participating in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (light jogging, jumping, or activities that provide continuous motion). The director should not support interscholastic or intramural activities as substitutes for the physical education recommendation of 150 and 225 minutes per week for elementary and middle or high school students, respectively.

The physical activity director should also sponsor professional development workshops to educate other teachers about how to effectively engage students and maximize instructional time. Teachers who minimize transitions, use instant activity, and employ a system of accountability to track physical activity engagement are more likely to have students who are physically active during more than 50 percent of their physical education class.

Step Three. The third step is to assume leadership in promoting physical activity throughout the school curriculum. In addition to physical activity breaks throughout the day, students should be given at least 20 minutes of supervised, active recess, preferably outdoors. During this time, students should engage in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. Generally, this can be accomplished by giving students instructions and by providing them with adequate space and appropriate equipment. Furthermore, since children who participate in physical education programs that include modified games are more likely to be physically active during recess (Beighle, Morgan, Le Masurier, & Pangrazi, 2006), children should be taught how to engage in these games independently during recess.

Activity Breaks

Activity breaks can be as short as five minutes or as long as 30 minutes. They include everything from recess to classroom time that is used to engage students in physical activity. Although some research suggests that student activity levels during recess are declining, a recent study found that children use a significant amount of their recess engaged in physical activity (Beighle et al., 2006; Jago & Baranowski, 2004). Pellegrini and colleagues (1995) studied Japanese school children who received a 10- to 15-minute activity break every hour. This group concluded that activity breaks spread throughout the day might help to improve attention and decrease behavior issues often associated with lack of focus in the classroom. Other research has shown that extra activity breaks during the day may increase physical activity levels outside of school, particularly for girls (Ernst & Pangrazi, 1999; Pangrazi, Beighle, Vehige, & Vack, 2003).

Other than physical education, activity breaks are most students' only source of physical activity during the school day. For this reason, activity breaks must be an integral part of a school's overall curriculum. Developing physical activity breaks throughout the school day, however, will rest on

the shoulders of the physical activity director, since most other teachers in the school will lack the knowledge to effectively implement a successful plan. What follows are some suggestions for facilitating a program of activity across the curriculum.

Active Recess. To help the supervisor facilitate highly physically active recess, the physical activity director can provide such things as equipment bags and lists of activities that engage students in appropriate, safe, and fun activities. Providing an equipment bag for each grade level is fairly easy. If possible, the equipment should be color-coordinated for simple distribution by grade level. For example, all equipment for the first grade could be purple. The equipment bag should contain a variety of physical activity equipment (funding for this equipment can come from donations or other mechanisms discussed by the PAC). If students choose to use the equipment, they must also be trained to return the equipment promptly to the bag at the end of recess. The physical activity director can help the recess supervisor to implement this routine. It is important for the physical activity director to realize that he or she does not have to be present to promote physical activity, but does have to provide the resources and models for others to follow.

Activity lists can be posted at the entrance to the activity break area. The list should also contain activities that do not require equipment. The physical activity director can take the lead in creating areas on the playground and in the gym that are designated for specific activities. For example, the director (or support personnel) could paint several four-square areas, a wall racketball court, a basketball free-throw lane, a map of the world, or bases within the activity area for student use. This gives students choices and encourages self-management. Throughout the school year, the equipment bags can be rotated and the activity lists can be changed to prevent boredom.

Activity Period Intramurals. Several secondary schools have weekly activity periods during the regularly scheduled school day in which they meet as members of clubs and organizations. Intramurals, typically thought of as an after-school program, can become an “association” that enables students to participate in physical activity during this targeted time. Intramurals should not be exclusionary, such as interscholastic athletics, but should encourage participation of any student who wishes to play. Initially the physical activity director facilitates the program to teach rules and procedures; however, the goal is to have the students eventually assume responsibility for the organization and implementation of the program.

Secondary Drop-in Activities. Students can also be engaged in activity during the lunch period. In particular, opportunities for engagement may discourage students in an open campus from driving to the closest fast-food restaurant to get lunch. Exciting drop-in activities can encourage students to remain on campus, to use cardiovascular equipment, lift in the weight room, or run on the track. In a constructive physical activity environment, students can engage in content



Photo by Gary Cruik

Activity breaks not only provide healthy physical activity, but can improve students' attention and decrease behavior problems according to research.

and activities that they learned during physical education class. At some schools, the physical education teacher could perform lunch duty in the weight room, thus supervising students who wish to be physically active at no additional expense to the school. Some schools have cardio rooms that resemble health clubs, complete with treadmills, other cardio machines, and a television set with ESPN. Ideally, the area would also be open to staff, which would again model for students the importance of lifelong physical activity. Of course, students would be required to pass an introductory course before being allowed to use the weight or cardiovascular rooms.

Connecting with the Larger School Community

A skilled physical activity director knows to look beyond the immediate confines of the school and into the community for additional resources and opportunities. Parents, for example, are a great resource and can even serve as physical activity coordinators during recess or other activity breaks. They could initiate a walking program that emphasizes activity but also provides a venue for children and youths to engage in conversation with others. Other members of the community can also play an important role. The ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) program might volunteer to oversee a before-school weight-training program, a local health insurance company may be willing to donate money to the school's physical education and physical activity program because it supports wellness, or a local doctor may wish to provide a series of informational sessions related to youth wellness. In short, connecting with the larger community can open new doors for implementing and maintaining a quality physical activity program.

Summary

The research is very clear; teachers must work to promote physical activity for all children. In today's education climate most schools have at least one person who is truly dedicated to physical activity for youths: the physical educator. The physical educator will likely have the most knowledge related to wellness and engagement in physical activity. The physical educator will also be the most valuable resource for creating a plan that engages both students and staff and implementing it across the curriculum. Those who are most committed will eagerly accept the challenge and assume the duty of physical activity director. These individuals will likely be energized by serving in an important leadership capacity and by playing such an important role in keeping students physically active.

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~~could help promote an agenda dedicated to encouraging all school children to be physically active.~~

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