The Physical Education Deficit in the High Schools

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Over the past few years, elementary and middle school physical education programs have continued to improve. Across the country, many more physical educators are applying solid movement education and skills-approach models to physical education in the K-8 settings. Many of these teachers have held themselves accountable for doing the right thing and creating not only an active environment, but an educational component as well. The problem is that we are seeing less and less physical education at the high school level, and less is expected from high school students. As children mature, they typically grow increasingly larger (% body fat) and less physically active. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2003) reports that being unfit as a youth highly correlates with being unfit as an adult. With this said, our society is creating a very unhealthy adolescent population due in part to low expectations from administrators, teachers, and parents for high school students in the physical education setting. These low expectations range from some states allowing high school students to take their physical education credits off campus to requiring physical education only of students who are not involved in extracurricular activities (i.e., athletics, drillteam, cheerleading, ROTC). This article addresses the administrative, teacher, and political issues related to the high school physical education setting.

Participation

It is well documented that physical education (PE) can increase student participation in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity and help high school students gain the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to engage in lifelong physical activity (CDC, 2004). Two of the national health objectives for 2010 are to (1) increase the proportion of adolescents who participate in daily school PE to more than 50 percent and (2) increase the proportion of adolescents who spend at least half of school physical education class time being physically active to more than 50 percent (Ogden et al., 2006). In 2003, only 55.7 percent of high school students were enrolled in a PE class, only 28.4 percent were attending PE class daily, and only 39.2 percent were physically active during PE class (CDC, 2004). Researchers have heard the following comments from high school physical education teachers about high school PE students: "Students in PE are not motivated to participate," "No matter what we try, the students will not get involved," and "These students are better off doing something else besides PE." There are several reasons for this type of attitude in high school physical educators.

Problems with Administrators

We have seen a trend over the past 20 years of administrators expecting physical education teachers to take on large numbers of students in a crowded environment and control them without assistance. In some settings, if the physical education teacher cannot control his or her class with the above conditions, then the administrator decides that the teacher is not a quality teacher and that he or she should be replaced or put on a probationary plan. This is unacceptable. Multiple studies over the past few years have shown that smaller class sizes produce higher academic achievement, increased concentration, a reduction in disruptive behaviors, and increased moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (Darst & Pangrazi, 2006; Hastie & Saunder, 1991; Hennessy, 2005; National Association for Sport and Physical Education [NASPE], 2006; Sallis et al., 1999; Shepard, 1996). Teachers also report that the classroom atmosphere is better, that students can receive more individualized attention, and that teachers have more flexibility to use different instructional approaches and assignments.

Instead of complaining about why students are failing in the high schools, a solution would be to hire more certified physical educators and decrease the class sizes from 40 or more per class to less than 30 per class (NASPE, 2006; Texas Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 2007)

The other issue that needs to be addressed with many high school administrators is their lack of expectations for the high school physical educator. Many administrators never darken the doors of the gym as long as complaints are minimal, and they often schedule other school activities in the PE teacher's classroom (gym) and expect the PE teacher either to sit for the class period or do some alternative activity (that may not have any PE value at all). For example, an administrator could walk into a gym in a high school setting and find some physical education teachers (who also coach) planning their workouts for the athletes whom they will see later in the day. This is not to say that all PE teachers who coach are like this, but it is not unusual in programs where athletics is deemed more important than physical education. In situations like this, ad-

ministrators miss the opportunity to hold the lazy teachers accountable and praise the ones who are doing a great job. On other occasions the teachers cannot do their expected activity on a specific day because the administrators have scheduled an assembly, a science fair, or book fair in the gym for a specified period of time while five PE teachers with 40 to 60 students in each of their classes (total of 200-300 students in one gym during extreme weather conditions) are trying to find a place to take their students for physical activity. Administrators must begin to place more importance on students acquiring the "physical" and "education" components in a class rather than only on how well the students can compete in a sport and how well a teacher can manage a large class size.

Problems with Physical Educators

Physical education teachers also play a role in the deterioration of high school PE. Every physical educator at every grade level (including high school) must have a strong and directed philosophy for how to reach students of all ability and interest levels. Some might believe that physical educators teach PE only so that they will have more time to prepare for their athletic programs and that they are not actually there to work with students who cannot perform. Others believe that physical education exists to reach the students who are incapable of playing sports. Yet others believe that all students should be exposed to multiple skills and fitness components. Whatever the belief, let us look at the facts.

Fact 1. Students are similar in every setting, whether urban, suburban, or rural. Human behavior does not change as a result of the type of school setting you are in unless the teacher expectations change. You can walk into a PE class in any setting where the PE teachers have high expectations, and 95 percent of your students will be engaged, respectful of others, and motivated to improve their skill or fitness level. Another three percent will be challenging, but will modify their behavior to do the right thing even though they are not interested, and the other one to two percent will refuse to do anything no matter the punishment or consequences. They do not want to be in school and will do anything to make every teacher's life miserable. This means that as a PE teacher, we should have high expectations and believe in our students because 98 percent of them will be engaged and do what we ask. We waste too much time on one to two percent of the students when we should be focusing on the 98 percent.

Fact 2. Physical education teachers can work with large groups of students, but the activities offered will be much less skill specific and will lack coverage of several NASPE outcomes per grade level due to the lack of equipment, space, or time. This means that learning still needs to take place until changes can be made in each school district's environment (i.e., class size, equipment, space).

Fact 3. High school students still like individualized attention, and physical education class is a great place for students to get this. Greeting students when they come in to get dressed for class, giving constructive feedback, and using students as an example when they do activities outside of the school setting are a few ways of giving students individual attention. This attention helps to maintain the respect and active participation from the students, even at the high school level.

These facts are overshadowed by the lack of expectations and the lack of importance placed on PE in the schools, however. This is causing a backlash that will make a huge impact on our ability to reach future students at the high school level.

Political View

Due to the apathy about PE in the high school setting among administrators and physical educators, it is no wonder that some state governments, such as Texas, are considering doing away with PE in high school. State senators feel that PE is not reaching the students anyway, so why spend so much money on employing PE teachers when they could better spend the money to employ teachers in other disciplines so that "state test scores" will increase. They feel that students can get physical activity outside of the school setting. Think about the effect that this will have on adolescents in the coming years.

Fact 1. Adolescent obesity will continue to rise if no system is in place to educate them about physical activity and fitness opportunities. It is not only about being active, but about understanding why they need to be active and how physical activity will affect their overall health throughout life.

Fact 2. State governments respond to those who speak the most and the loudest in their jurisdictions. We are allowing the attitudes of others to influence what happens to physical educators. We as an organization need to speak more and louder than others about the needs and responsibilities of our nation to help change the attitudes and behaviors of youths on the activity scene.

Solutions

1. Physical educators have to demonstrate a need for PE in the high schools. We need to clean up our own locations and hold ourselves accountable before anyone else will consider changing the situations. Quit looking at what you do as a job and begin to look at what you do as an opportunity to change adolescents' lives for the better.

2. Physical educators should promote their programs among administrators. You can begin to educate them on the positive things that result from having PE in the schools.

3. Keep a positive mindset and believe in your ability to make a difference. Be creative with equipment needs and offer quality activities in spite of large class sizes. For example, each high school in a specific school district could order a different piece of equipment that will accommodate at least 40 students and then rotate the units and equipment throughout the school district. Offer activities that can accommodate large groups if that is what is needed. Do not try to offer small-group activities with large groups. It is not safe, nor does it allow for maximum participation.

4. Maintain or begin to build high expectations for your students. These expectations could include dressing out appropriately, starting class punctually, engaging in many different activities, and displaying good attitudes and behavior.

5. Educate the community and parents on the necessities of the "physical" and the "education" in our high schools. Invite parents and people in the community to visit a PE class in order to see what really goes on there. This shows the students that what you do is important, which helps them see the importance of what they do.

6. Educate your state senators about the importance of PE at all grade levels. Being physically active is a life choice. Physical inactivity is the second greatest killer in the United States behind tobacco use. Why? Inactivity leads to obesity and other health-related diseases, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, cancer, and Alzheimer's, among others.

It is time to stand up and fight for what is important to us as a health, physical education, dance, and recreation organization. We are allowing others to dictate what happens to us instead of us taking control of events. A coordinated, multilevel approach involving schools, communities, and policymakers is needed to increase participation in daily, quality PE among all students.

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