Leadership COMPASS
Helping Principals Create and Sustain Learning Communities
naesp National Association of Elementary School Principals

Fall 2008, Vol. 6, No. 1

In the Real World: Gym Class or Physical Education?

There's a world of difference between tossing out a ball and encouraging lifelong physical activity.

Christopher Peal

Back in the day, kids would attend gym class once or twice a week. Meeting them at the beginning of the class would most likely be a burly man—usually a former athlete or coach—who would choose up teams for indoor or outdoor games, toss out a ball, say "play," then "it's time to go," and that would be that.

Nowadays, children attend physical education class two or three times a week, rotating throughout the school year a variety of skill sports, including soccer, basketball, football, and tennis. Although instructors are still mostly of the vintage jock world, and still throw out the proverbial ball at the start of class, they now interact and participate in activities. Instruction, sometimes including a writing requirement, is accompanied by the tallying of individual student scores on a litany of subset tests to determine athletic accomplishment, ability, and prowess. Today's kids worship their physical education teachers in a fashion similar to that of the adoring throngs toward million-dollar athletic superstars.

So, aside from the "being liked" factor, what really has changed in the past 30 years in the teaching of physical education in schools?

Yesterday and Today

Historically, physical education instruction has had two chief functions. First, it provided a primary source of candidates to fill administrative vacancies. If you could throw the ball out well or coach well, you could end up as an assistant principal at the junior high or high school level. Win a tournament or two, and you got to be principal.

Second, it was a welcome reprieve for general education teachers during the school day, providing them with a valuable block of preparation time.

Today, physical education continues to be a source for principal recruiting. Along with art and music, it also plays a key role in providing preparation time for general education teachers. However, a third and more important development in the past decade or so has been the emergence of a physical education curriculum that has become much more articulated, refined, and standards-based.

Many states have established campaigns for lifelong physical activity, and have initiated their efforts within physical education curriculums at the elementary school level. Numerous states, such as Michigan (**www.michiganfitness.org/EPEC/default.htm**) and California (**www.calgovcouncil.org**), have established well-tooled organizational efforts aimed in a number of directions, including redefining the delivery of physical education instruction. These organizations fall under the broader umbrella of The National Association for Health & Fitness (**www.physicalfitness.org**), a national effort "to improve the quality of life for individuals in the United States through the promotion of physical fitness, sports, and healthy lifestyles." Therein, physical education teachers follow set curriculums and district-level physical education departments attempt to meet benchmark standards for curricular and program elements.

Other organizations such as KidsHealth (**http://kidshealth.org/kid/stay_healthy**) and Kidnetic (**www.kidnetic.com**) provide useful information for children

©2008 National Association of Elementary Principals. All Rights Reserved.

and their families to better stay fit through regular exercise and care.

Fighting Obesity

Yet, despite all of these efforts, childhood obesity persists, and asthma, allergy, and chronic health rates continue to soar. Many kids report spending their summer vacations playing video games or sitting in front of a television and becoming bystanders to the world around them.

Although school systems and their physical education departments cannot be the sole answer to these problems, physical education classes can serve as an inspirational springboard for all children—and their parents—to be more fit. By providing a variety of activities and challenging opportunities for students from all athletic levels and abilities, "gym time" can be much more than tossing out a ball.

From the field,

Christopher Peal

Christopher Peal is principal of Meadowbrook Elementary School in Novi, Michigan. His e-mail address is **pealc@walledlake.k12.mi.us**.

©2008 National Association of Elementary School Principals. All Rights Reserved.