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JOURNAL ARTICLES

Putting the Physical Back into Education

Lon Kilgore



Public school physical education stinks. Along with that, we see record obesity, record low fitness, and record low activity levels among school-age kids in the United States. How many schools in the U.S. have a requirement for daily physical education? How many schools provide adequate staff, equipment, and time for physical education so it has a chance at being effective? Although administrators everywhere in the U.S. will say they do, it is a sad fact that, over and over again, the norm is that free-for-all recess is counted as physical education in many school systems. It is also common that physical educators, like one I know in Bowie, Texas, have 65 kids and only 45 minutes, a gymnasium, limited resources, and a state-mandated curriculum to work with. The curricula tend to be focused either on short units on various team sports or on “health” and “lifetime activities”—but never on fitness.

All these factors are a recipe for failure of epidemic proportion. One of my master’s students chronicled this failure in a thesis research project that assessed fitness improvement over two years of junior high school physical education. Of the three junior high schools studied, only one set of kids made even minor improvements in standard physical fitness scores. This abysmal showing is made even more dismal by the fact that the students studied are quite hormonally competent,

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growing and developing physically on nearly a daily basis. They should be able to become more fit with even a little progressive exercise. The results make it evident that the part of physical education class directed toward improving physical fitness was inadequate if not completely absent, or its design and implementation were highly inappropriate.

This systemic failure is not confined to George Bush Junior's home state; it is pervasive, existing in every state of the union. Sure there are bright spots such as Rancho Buena Vista High, where PE teacher (and world-class Olympic weightlifting coach) Mike Burgener improves the life and fitness of every student he touches, but he is just one guy who has found a way, in spite of the system, to make a difference. For every Mike, there are thousands of other physical educators who have been frustrated in their attempts simply to do their jobs. For every Mike who understands what physical fitness is, what it means, and how to get it there are thousands of others who think fitness is a warm fuzzy feeling or has to do with knowing the rules of pickleball. For every system that allows someone like Mike to teach to the benefit of the student and supports it with (relatively minor) equipment expenditures, there are thousands of other systems that spend their "health and physical education" time on drug and sex education—valuable topics but hardly contributory to physical fitness or to reducing the epidemic of childhood obesity.

Ever since the original governmental alarmist document "A Nation at Risk" was published by a National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983, there has been a slow erosion of support for physical education in public schools and in quality preparation of physical educators in colleges and universities. We cannot be too quick to blame public school administrators or educators since they are required to follow legislated educational guidelines. Similarly, we cannot be quick to blame university preparatory programs as they are simultaneously hamstrung by having to deliver a curriculum that delivers legislated content, not practical physical fitness content, and they must also defer to university or professional program accreditation bodies. These agencies frequently have political agendas and cookie cutter templates for what a program is supposed to look like to meet the political flavor of the day.

But oops! The de-emphasis on physical education over the past two-plus decades has put us in quite a predicament. Kids are still performing poorly academically compared to the rest of the industrialized world and now they are fat and unfit too. How can we fix this? We can't within the current political environment and with the current physical education curriculum in the U.S. What is quite interesting is that the more "education experts" and education colleges and departments get involved in improving our kids' education, the lower they fall in international rankings of academic performance, health, and fitness.



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Oh surely there is a way, one might argue. No. Physical fitness is a hard subject. It takes effort, and gets progressively harder effort the longer you do it. How is the physical educator going to get the aloof and carefully coiffed and dressed high school student to do enough burpees to elicit a training effect if sweating makes them smelly and they won't take a shower before their next class? If they even had enough time to do so, that is, and if they happened to go a school housed in an older building (since most new schools are not built with showers). So we find that required gym class is a physical and social nuisance to most older students. They find ways to ditch class, to do the minimal amount to keep Coach off their back, to not fail the class, and to not wrinkle their well-crafted fashion identity.

Many many tactics have been experimented with in order to increase participation of these young adults, but one fact never changes: going to gym class will never be as attractive to kids as going to the gym on their own. Enforced physical education, because of its devaluation over the past two decades, and the way it is currently constructed, does not work in high schools. There has to be a culture of physical fitness to make physical education attractive and approachable to our kids. Some people point to varsity athletics as a viable program of physical education, but athletics is limited in scope of participation and is not really physical education. The term athletics is derived from the

Greek *athlein*, to contend for a prize. It was used in reference to Olympic, Nemean, and Panhellenic games competitors, never in reference to students learning physical skills or developing fitness. How many schools suit up every boy and girl for practice and competition in sports for the entire year? Very few. Athletics is too narrow, too specific, and too competitive to substitute for a program of broad and useful physical education.

While there is no way to develop a 100-percent-effective system, even a 50-percent-effective system would be an improvement. What just might work is actually constructing physical education programs in a manner that truly addresses physical education, provides students with tangible progress, and fits within the time and equipment constraints of the modern physical education classroom. What I propose here is a bottom-up system implementation, not an across-the-board intervention. An insurgency, if you will. It starts with getting physical education programs and school administrators to actively choose “physical fitness”—not “health” or sporting skills—as a programmatic goal of elementary schools, home to the most intuitively active and receptive student group. Physical education class would be where we lead them through the right amount, type, and intensity of exercise to improve physical fitness. Recess would become the place where organized and supervised games would occur. What this means is tossing out the old ideas of physical education

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and making the goals and approach of CrossFit the goals of public school physical education classes.

CrossFit would work wonderfully since it does not require lengthy training sessions to elicit results. It also can be done with a lower equipment budget than the traditional “teaching” of team sports. An organized teacher could quite easily teach students about functional exercise and execute an appropriate workout well within the 45 minutes or less typically assigned to physical education. Workouts would also be infinitely scalable to individual students’ fitness levels and motor maturity. No child is left behind in this scenario because every one of them can perform at least an adaptation of the exercise and will get more physically fit as a result. If school CrossFit can recreate the compliance and adherence rates—and therefore the results—seen in adult CrossFit populations, physical education will grow in popularity. Because CrossFit workouts are effective, fun, and challenging, and because successfully doing them brings participants back for more, all the pieces for effective physical education are there. Think about this: if every kid becomes fitter during physical education class, then when they play kickball, soccer, or whatever other sporting activity they choose during recess, they will be able to play longer, harder, and more safely—and enjoy it more—and therefore want to do it more—and therefore get fitter—and therefore...I think you get the picture. We would be equipping our kids for physical success.

So does every public school physical educator need to become a capable CrossFit instructor? Maybe. It certainly would be a step toward solving the problem of physical education delivery in schools and would definitively make for a more fit American youth. But we are at the mercy of the politicians, and when the primary exercise mode for most of them is jogging (for maximum photo ops and minimum exertion and fuss and muss), there is only a glimmer of a hope that we will ever be able to rely on public school physical education to deliver the goods.

A more realistic scenario is that every CrossFit facility could become part of the “CrossFit Kids” consortium. Parents know that school physical education doesn’t provide physical fitness. Why are there millions of soccer moms out there? Why do martial arts studios thrive? Parents see their kids’ lack of fitness and want to provide them what’s missing—more time to exercise and get fit doing something they enjoy. But it doesn’t

have to be sport programs. If you turn kids loose in a well-equipped CrossFit gym they invariably go non-stop through the gym, “playing” with kettlebells, hanging on ropes and rings, tumbling on the mats, jumping on and over boxes, and more. They will essentially do a CrossFit-type workout without any coaxing or negotiating. Ask if it was fun. They will say “Yeah!” Ask if they want to go again. They will say “Yeah!”

And there we have it, the best and most receptive audience for physical education available, the flushed-cheek, out-of-breath, smiling kid who doesn’t even know that being a CrossFit kid is hard and progressive training.



For resources on CrossFit training for kids, see Jeff and Mikki Martin’s [CrossFit Kids](#) website and magazine.

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