How to Prevent Children From Being Left Behind

by Kerri Tunnicliffe, Charlie Chatterton, and Bonnie Arcari

Physical educators recognize the valuable contributions that exemplary physical education programs make to schools and to the children that attend them. Unfortunately, school administrators and school boards are placed in a difficult position when federal government mandates do not reflect an understanding of the potential for quality physical education to assist in the development of healthy children. Programmatic priorities and related interventions deemed necessary to comply with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Elementary and Education Act of 2002 are responsible for the most dramatic changes in education of this generation. NCLB attempts to hold states more accountable for the academic success of all children in their respective schools. Therefore, federal funding has become dependent upon schools meeting specific criteria and making adequate yearly progress. The main components of NCLB are (a) accountability to high standards for all schools receiving federal money, (b) annual standardized assessments in reading and math, and (c) allowing children in schools that fail to meet the specified standards over a three-year period the option of transferring to a higher performing school (Whitehouse, 2002). Priorities for schools include improvements in the areas of academic performance, teacher quality, and English instruction for all children.

Getting Physical Education Invited to the Dance

NCLB legislation focuses on improving competency in reading and math for all children; however, when school administrators and teachers examine the academic progress and development of children under their supervision, it is critical that they also evaluate the total well-being of their students, not just scores from high-stakes testing. The importance of having healthy children must be emphasized, and the potential positive role that physical education plays in this to provide
an optimal educational experience development must be reinforced. The mission to provide an optimal learning experience for children falls short if this does not occur. Further, a full curriculum that promotes children's emotional, psychological, and physical health in addition to the cognitive domain is vital to the development of the whole child, not just the academic content areas required within NCLB.

Legislative policies such as NCLB seem to ignore the turning tide of health among Americans. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates 15% of children in the U.S. are overweight and one third of all children born in 2000 will be at risk to develop diabetes (National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, 2003). Childhood obesity is now among the top health problems for children (Ebbeling, Pawlak, & Ludwig, 2002). Too many Americans lead a sedentary lifestyle, and the rate of obesity continues to climb in both children and adults (Ogden, Flegal, Carroll, & Johnson, 2002). Further, research consistently indicates that overweight children are likely to become overweight adults (CDC, 2003). Striving to increase physical activity during childhood should be considered a priority and be supported by creative, educationally sound, and developmentally appropriate physical education programs.

Physical education, despite its vital role in the development of healthy children, is not included as a core subject area within NCLB. Unfortunately, the impact of NCLB on physical education has been primarily negative. NCLB mandates have established narrow priority areas via which schools are measured, leading to recognition for schools and administrators. All other content areas have become candidates for reduction or removal in order to create additional time for reading and math. To reverse this trend, Senator John Cornyn of Texas has proposed legislation that would amend NCLB to include minimum standards for health and physical education. Unless and until it is enacted, a significant percentage of children are being left behind when it comes to overall health and well-being (Cornyn introduces bill, 2005).

### What Physical Educators Can Do

#### National Standards

While it may be shortsighted for policymakers and school administrators not to recognize the importance of children's health and wellness in connection with academic performance, it is imperative that physical education professionals provide educational experiences for children that can be recognized for their quality. Physical educators must not only be skilled in developing age appropriate learning experiences, they must also be adept at educating and informing adults of the benefits of these experiences. Unfortunately, many adults harbor memo-

ries of less than positive physical education experiences. Physical educators must examine their own programs with this in mind and reflect on the most current knowledge and best teaching practices.

Health behaviors established in childhood are critical for lifelong health (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2004). School physical education curriculums play a potentially significant role in educating children about the benefits of a physically active lifestyle, both now and in the future.

The concept of a physically educated person is an important goal in children's overall development. Physical educators can assist adults and children to learn behavioral strategies necessary to the development of healthy behaviors, specifically those demonstrated by a physically educated person.

The NASPE standards (NASPE, 2004) serve two main purposes related to this effort. First, they describe what a physically educated person should know and be able to do as a result of a quality physical education program. Second, they provide teacher-friendly guidelines for assessing content standards.

With the national standards in mind, a number of positive steps can be taken by physical educators to improve their programs, keeping in mind the necessity of providing appropriate experiences for the developing child who is not only academically successful but also seeking movement opportunities necessary to live a healthy life. The most important step begins with a solid curricular model that educates not only children of the dangers of an unhealthy lifestyle, but their families and the greater community as well.

#### Appropriate Instruction

The emphasis on physical activity and health typically begins in elementary school with a focus on fundamental movement patterns implemented through guided discovery. A movement education model that emphasizes exploration and discovery is preferred to models that replicate traditional sports. It is vital to teach developmentally appropriate skills and movement concepts that a child can refer to and depend upon when subsequently attempting to learn new skills and activities. Such knowledge increases the likelihood of children engaging in physical activity on their own. In addition, the physical activity itself supports, rather than detracts from, academic achievement [www.ActionForHealthyKids.org]. This certainly supports NCLB initiatives.

As Williams (1994) has noted, physical educators should plan lessons with safety as a top priority, creating activities with no chance of embarrassment or elimination, allowing the development of motor skills in an age appropriate manner, and creating activities that maximize participation and physical activity. While it is easy to make excuses relative to lack of space and equipment or large class sizes, it is critical that physical educators remain open and willing to make changes where appropriate.
Quality programs and curriculum are dynamic, continuing to improve and challenge teachers and students alike, instead of just collecting dust on a shelf. Helping children appreciate and enjoy physical activity should be a top priority, because enjoyment of physical activity supports development of the physically educated person. While not all children will value every activity in which they participate (as stated in NASPE standard 6), it lays the groundwork to assist children in developing skills and discovering new activities they can enjoy now and in the future.

Visibility

Next, a quality physical education program must be made visible in order to gain the support of the school administration, fellow teachers, the community, and most importantly, the children themselves. It is essential that the entire community be educated on the positive benefits of exercise, the role of living a physically active lifestyle, and its positive relationship to health.

Professional development time shared with all the physical educators within a school district ensures a consistent scope and sequence between the various programs; however, communication with professionals in other content areas within the school also allows ideas to be shared that enhance awareness and practices for all. Alignment of a solid, comprehensive curriculum, not only within physical education but also across disciplines, reinforces the importance of educating the whole child. Integrating math or reading with physical activity increases students’ enjoyment of the different subjects, is an efficient use of time, and benefits children’s overall educational experience.

It is imperative that the entire community, both within and outside the school, be educated on the value and importance of physical education and physical activity. The attitudes and actions of community leaders, school administrators, teachers, and parents all play a significant role in shaping and molding children’s attitudes toward physical education and physical activity. Fostering a positive attitude toward a lifetime appreciation and participation in physical activity begins with quality instruction that cultivates and nurtures. Collaboration with other significant adults in a child’s life only increases the chances that child will come to value the benefits of physical activity.

Other strategies for increasing visibility:

• Incorporate S.P.A.R.K. (Sport, Play, and Active Recreation for Kids) into recess and after school programs. This program reinforces movement concepts and skill themes children learn in physical education (www.sparkpe.org/programElementaryPE.jsp).

• Create a monthly or quarterly newsletter to keep parents up to date about what their children are doing in PE, along with strategies to help keep them active at home. Send the newsletter out with report cards or other school communications. Emphasize to parents that physical education is taken seriously at your school and that it is an important component of their child’s education.

• Create a website. Provide parents with links to different websites to educate them on health-related issues, ranging from proper eating habits to lifetime activities they can share with their children. Also, include links that inform them of community, state, and national strategies to decrease the obesity rate as well as other chronic diseases. An example would be www.actionforhealthykids.org.

• Host a “stress free day” each month for colleagues to come and reduce stress through lifetime activities before or after school. Also, highlight specific benefits of physical activity in weekly morning announcements or as a point of information in other communications.

• Hold periodic parent/child exercise and physical activity nights that allow children and their parents an opportunity to enjoy and possibly learn to exercise together. Highlight specific activities and discuss related benefits.

• During a Back to School Night, have parents meet in the gymnasium where they can be shown innovative activities taking place in physical education. Encourage and present ways that parents can be physically active with their children throughout the course of these activity units. Circulate an information sheet parents can refer to after the presentation. Include teacher contact information in case they have questions.

• Assign homework that requires a parent’s signature or participation. This helps children understand the importance of physical activity, while also keeping parents informed of current activity units. An assignment could be as simple as finding a physically active alternative to watching T.V. for ½ hour twice a week. Though completed as homework, students could share their ideas as a warm-up over several class periods.

• Start a walking program before or after school for students and/or faculty. Involve the community by educating the participants, as well as community leaders, about the importance of providing an environment, such as sidewalks and crosswalks, that support and encourage physical activity. Spearhead this initiative by coordinating the school’s participation in programs such as National Walk to School Day, held annually in October.

• Advocate to policymakers at all levels on the economic burden of chronic disease. Educate them on the potential cost savings when systems are in place to promote and support physical
Looking Beyond NCLB

Improved accountability and test scores should not come at the expense of children's current and future health. It is already an uphill battle to provide healthy nutrition and physical activity for children, without having to counter the threat of diminished health and physical education in schools. Caregivers face a Herculean challenge to create a healthy environment for children when significantly more resources seem available for advertising fast food, junk food, and soda. In addition, the explosion of passive entertainment devices (home computers, DVDs, Xbox, and Internet) and television programming promotes sedentary activity. Though it should not be up to the federal government to solve societal problems, it seems the government should help parents and schools to raise healthy children, not make the battle more difficult by shifting priorities in a way that creates a stressed out mind in an unhealthy body.

Algebra formulas and Shakespeare quotes, while important, should not be emphasized at the expense of physical education. Physical education class not only provides children with basic movement concepts and skill themes, it also lays the groundwork for children to learn to value physical activity, which translates into positive health outcomes and an improved quality of life, one of the overarching goals of Healthy People 2010.

Fortunately, Senator Cornyn is one policymaker who has recognized the value of physical education. He has stated, "While it is certainly critical that our children are proficient in the basic subject of mathematics, English, and science, it is also important that they have access to quality physical and health education programs that will provide the foundation of healthy lifestyles, and that's why I support a physical education requirement in our schools" (Cornyn introduces bill, 2005). Until programs and policies are in line with the views of Senator Cornyn, and other advocates for quality physical education, the lack of emphasis on physical education in schools sends a clear message to children that exercise is optional and not as important as other core content areas. Children will be left behind if physical education and health professionals do not advocate for the importance of their profession. But, most importantly, children will be left behind if they do not receive proper instruction, feedback, and opportunities to become a physically educated person.

References


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