Fitness Testing in the Schools: Once More Around the Track

It’s the issue that just doesn’t seem to want to go away—conducting standardized (even compulsory) physical fitness testing in the schools—and, as usual, there aren’t many who are taking neutral positions. Boon or bane? Is this an effective means of creating awareness of exercise for health, stimulating interventions for improving fitness? Or is testing the antithesis to the promotion of improving activity in sedentary children, creating an image of competitiveness and discomfort of exercise? Is it pedagogically useful or a misguided endeavor with no good rationale? The debate continues. . . .

Two recent articles have once again resurrected these issues. Geraldine Naughton and her colleagues in Australia, writing in the *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, launched what was politely termed a “challenge” to fitness testing in primary schools but what, in reality, amounts to a full-scale land–sea assault (2). “What have decades of testing in schools contributed to the health of young people in Australia?” they demanded. The traditional concerns are enumerated: lack of validity of testing, meaningless standards, lack of relevance to health, and “turn-off” to those sedentary children most in need of encouragement for lifelong activity. “Large-scale fitness testing in schools appears to be the antithesis of population health promotion policies” they conclude. So, given all this, “why is fitness testing common place in primary schools today?”

In a second article, Jim Morrow from the University of North Texas addressed the critical need to assess current levels of physical fitness in youth (1). In response to the question “Are American children and youth fit?” Morrow suggests that “we do not know and it’s time we learned!” Following an excellent historical review of physical fitness testing in the United States, Morrow concludes that fitness testing is important to understanding the current youth fitness levels: “are they decreasing, unchanged, or improving? Are youth sufficiently physically fit for health and to reduce risk for disease?” He concludes that, despite traditional media blab, we don’t know the answers to these important questions. “If [physical activity and fitness] are not measured, people perceive them as not important. It is time that well-defined, valid measures of health-related fitness and components are identified.” He presumably means to include school-based testing in this strategy but also calls for the collaboration of groups such as the medical profession, research scientists, teachers, and measurement experts.

In this issue of *Pediatric Exercise Science*, Lorraine Cale and her associates provide one British viewpoint of this controversy. Ten years ago in these Notes this editor echoed the concerns of many that school fitness testing was misguided, and reasons were offered for abandoning testing in an equestrian-oriented commentary titled “The horse is dead; let’s dismount” (3). As this otherwise insightful editorial was inexplicably ignored and seems to have had little dent in the practice, Cale et al. reexamine the issue a decade later—essentially coming to the same conclusions.
I have asked several highly esteemed experts in the area of fitness testing (one being Dr. Morrow himself) to comment on Cale’s assessment, and these follow her article. It should be noted that these were not selected to represent a balanced viewpoint on the issue. Indeed, all of these experts have been closely involved with the creation of testing approaches and have served on testing consultative boards. So, they have the perspective of having long struggled with these questions, and one would expect that they are getting pretty used to defining their stand on school-based fitness testing. As one reads their comments there is, in fact, a certain uniformity of opinion that, yes, there are potential problems, but, yes, school-based testing is valuable and warranted, if used appropriately. As one of them communicated to me, “Let’s take a look at the trainers and jockeys before blaming the horse.”

As always, your written comments are invited.

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Kudos to Karin Pfeiffer and her staff for their organization of an excellent biennial meeting of the North American Society for Pediatric Exercise Medicine in Charleston, SC, last September. The science was excellent, the colleguery most enjoyable, and the shrimp even better. As a reminder, the abstracts of both poster and oral presentation sessions from this meeting have been compiled in an electronic supplement to Pediatric Exercise Science, which can be found at www.humankinetics.com/PES/journalAbout.cfm. Click on the last link (Latest Conference Abstracts) in the box on the left.

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References