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THE NEW PE

by Tom Weir
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'Life' Sports Are Emphasized Instead of the Team Concept So That No Child Is Left Out.

Everyone agrees with the educational catchphrase, "A child's mind is a terrible thing to waste."

But what about the hearts, lungs and legs of those same young bodies?

Questions about the rapidly declining physical fitness of U.S. youth are being asked more and more by the nation's educators as children continue their free-time migration from playgrounds to sedentary positions in front of computers and televisions.

The surge in childhood obesity among this fast-food gobbling generation indicates today's youth could reach middle age with the weakest set of hearts in this nation's history, setting off a health-care disaster.

So what's the answer?

For Bane McCracken, physical education director at Cabell-Midland High School, in Ona, W.Va., the solution has been to teach "The New PE."

McCracken has abandoned the old, roll-out-the-balls approach to physical education classes, where it was tough luck for whoever got picked last and no one worried much about timid or embarrassed kids who gravitated toward the sidelines.

In McCracken's classes, mountain biking and whitewater rafting have replaced stand-around games of softball.

"It's just going to be a matter of time before people realize we have to do something to get our kids to be more active," McCracken says. "The kids who come into our classes are getting less and less fit. With more and more kids I find that just a fast walk is about all they can do, and they're going to break our health-care system."

The New PE strives for lifetime approaches to fitness. Its growing vanguard of advocates says it's time to scrap the PE most baby boomers had. They believe that era's emphasis on team sports puts today's less-fit children in situations where they fail in public and naturally tend to withdraw from the activity, increasing their chances not only for obesity but also heart disease, the nation's No. 1 cause of death.

McCracken's New PE epiphany came about 15 years ago, when he brought an early-generation mountain bike to a class that was scheduled to play softball.

"One of the kids asked if he could ride it," McCracken says. "The game stopped, and everybody wanted to ride the bike."

The next day, he also brought his wife's mountain bike. Eventually, with grants and trips to flea markets, he built his fleet of mountain bikes to 30, and he had the equipment to keep an entire class active instead of standing in the outfield, waiting for the occasional fly ball.

From there, McCracken also began to teach aerobics, weightlifting, backpacking, fly-fishing and other outdoor activities.

"What I feel good about is that I see a lot of kids who hate PE, who have always been chosen last, but they come out and do the non-traditional stuff and say, 'Wow, I can do this.' They really like it," McCracken says. "We don't teach PE just for the athletes. You have to look at today's kids and see that some of them are not even capable of playing a sport. You have to teach them skills to stay fit."

Adults, McCracken says, often have a difficult time understanding how vital physical activity is going to be for the future of a generation that tends to be driven everywhere by car.

"Most of today's adults were physically active as kids. They have a foundation. But today's kids don't have that foundation," McCracken says. "They've taken 18 years to get this unfit. They're reaching a point where they'll never get fit. The fitness of our kids is scary. But parents haven't gotten that message."

FITNESS HELPS SCHOOLWORK

That message was delivered pointedly in a 1996 Surgeon General's report that said, among people ages 12-21, nearly 50% weren't active on a regular basis.

The report also found that high school enrollment in daily PE classes dropped from 42% in 1991 to 25% by 1995.

Despite the report's call for daily physical activity, Illinois is the only state that requires PE classes daily. Even there, the requirement can be waived by participation in band or other activities.

"I think we do need to have PE mandated," says Lynn Babcock, a Livonia, Mich., principal who is president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. "If you don't have your health, you have nothing."

But the problem, Babcock says, is that society is placing intense pressure on schools to boost scores on standardized tests while seldom addressing fitness issues.

"I believe the majority of people feel physical fitness is very important, but we're tested in math and other subjects, and our scores are published across the state," Babcock says. "Our fitness results aren't published."

Babcock would like to see that change.

"I think (fitness) standards have to be in place for those who aren't committed to it or don't think it's important," she says. "There needs to be at least a basic guideline. If we don't get them active at school, it won't happen. I wish we were getting more help from the home and the community, but we can't wait for that."

Carl Gabbard, a Texas A&M professor of health and kinesiology and president of the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, says communities are mistaken if they believe sacrificing all play time for more studies will make their children better students.

"Children who are physically fit do better in school. That's a statement we can make," Gabbard says. "Physical activity doesn't make students smarter, but they're more alert and they concentrate better. That we know."

But apathy toward fitness programs for children remains widespread, Gabbard says, because parents don't realize how bad the situation is.

"Parents in general appear to have the feeling that their children get fit naturally. They think all children are fit and active. But what they perceive and what's correct aren't the same."

FUNDING FOR NEW IDEAS

Legislatively, the most strident effort to provide funding to reverse this national trend has come from Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska.

Stevens has submitted the Physical Education for Progress (PEP) bill, which would provide \$400 million in grants for physical education programs over a four-year period. It might come up as a floor amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act next week.

Professor Gabbard says one of the biggest obstacles to that legislation will be overcoming perceptions of what PE class has been, rather than what it can become.

"I did hear this from one senator: '...If we're thinking of funding the same physical education that I had as a kid, I don't want to support it,'" Gabbard says.

For most children, the negative effects of poor physical education programs take lasting hold of activity habits about the age of 12.

"For children who have had bad experiences with PE or sports, once they get to junior high, forget it," Gabbard says. "Every year, more things come into their lives that give them other choices.

"They don't feel as successful in that (sports) setting."

CHILDREN SHOULD HAVE FUN

Increasing the number of successful experiences for children in PE classes really isn't so difficult, says Virginia Tech health and PE professor George Graham, who's also senior adviser for the PE Central Web site that suggests innovations (pe.central.vt.edu).

For the kids who have difficulty with volleyball, Graham says, let them use a bigger beach ball. In baseball or softball, get out a batting tee. And quit turning slow-moving children into sitting ducks during games of dodge ball.

"A lot of us think that third-grade kids decide whether they'll be active or not," Graham says. "But it's when they don't have

much of a chance to participate, or they don't have a lot of fun, they shut down.

"A big part of our philosophy is that kids need to be successful. If you can design a program where kids are successful 80% of the time, you have a good program."

With some of those programs including higher-risk activities like rollerblading, there naturally are some concerns about insurance, but most family health plans will cover sports-related injuries incurred at school.

"If you're careful, if it's well thought out, it's a pretty safe environment for kids," Graham says.

"I think there are some principals who worry. I think it's a way out if somebody doesn't want to do something new or creative, but innovative principals find a way to do it."

Another key is to introduce children to more potential activities.

"We're trying to help kids find their tendencies," Graham says. "What activity is it that you like? They're all OK. Some kids love to do stuff to music. Some kids love dance, some hate it. Some love to jog by themselves. I'd even like to see kids learn to pogo stick in PE class.

"The problem historically is that we've only introduced them to three or four team sports."

The use of computers in tracking fitness also appeals to today's tech-savvy students.

Graham says philosophical change won't happen if schools rely only on coaches to teach PE.

"We have a lot of coaches teaching PE, and pretty much what they can do is coach," Graham says. "No one is putting pressure on PE teachers to change. The administrators pretty much shirk their responsibility and look the other way. They hire coaches first, they don't hire PE teachers."

Meanwhile, Graham says, "We've got places now that are not only saying no PE, but no recess. Can you imagine a second-grader taking no time out all day? It's incredible."

And it's yet another sign of how some schools discount the importance of keeping children active.

"PE isn't valued until somebody has a disease or is sick," Graham says.

"Kids don't need it until someone is overweight, has had a heart attack and says, 'I wished I had worked out.'"

ILLINOIS SCHOOL SETS PACE AS PE MODEL

Cardiovascular Wellness Is a Top Priority at Naperville

Students leave high school in Naperville, Ill., with a second kind of transcript besides the one that tracks classes and grades.

It is a fitness profile dating to the sixth grade, and it provides a personal history on blood pressure, cholesterol levels, body fat percentage and the student's cardiovascular performance.

The Naperville school district's approach to physical education has led to it being named a model program by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Naperville decided to modernize its approach to PE about 15 years ago after making the painful realization that its gym classes were failing to serve the community.

"We had a staff meeting, and someone brought in an article on the trend of obesity and kids," says Phil Lawler, the district's PE coordinator. "We said, 'Is this a reflection on us?' That day, we made a decision. We went through our whole curriculum and said let's put all of our emphasis on cardiovascular fitness."

One of the first steps forward was realizing that in this age of technology, children react best to a computer-driven PE system.

"We have computers hooked up to every weight machine," Lawler says of the 40-station fitness centers his district has at five junior highs. "A kid punches in his ID, and computers measure everything. They can push a button and get an exact readout on their workout."

In the first year of cholesterol screening, Naperville teachers could determine that 50% of their students had elevated levels.

"This is the kind of thing that could be happening nationwide," says Lawler, who established his first fitness center without tax dollars, entirely through community support.

But money shouldn't be the deciding issue, Lawler says. "What does a heart attack cost?" he asks.

One answer is provided by the American Heart Association, whose most recent figures show that in 1995 alone 573,000 Americans had coronary artery bypass surgery at an average cost of \$44,820, a total of \$25.7 billion.

TARGET-RATE ZONE

Naperville makes extensive use of heart-rate monitors, teaching children to exercise in a "target-rate zone" that raises the pulse but doesn't exhaust the student.

"We grade kids on how well they stay in their target-rate zone," Lawler says.

Says Naperville seventh-grader Jacqueline Garretson: "I've learned it's not always the easiest thing to do, going to a fitness center, but I've learned things about how I can be healthy when I'm older. And I'm having fun while I'm doing it."

She's also developing an awareness of the health mistakes many Americans make.

"There are people in my family who have had health problems and high blood pressure," she says. "I think they could have avoided some of those things if they had learned this when they were young."

For Jenny Mayor, a high school senior in Naperville, the most important thing she has learned is that her school's program "tailors everything to what each student needs, and that way you work on what you need most. That helps me personalize my goals."

Without instruction on physical education, Mayor says, some teenagers don't understand what fitness really means.

"A lot of kids just look at looks," she says. "You could be really thin and think you're in good shape, but when you start to exercise you realize you're not. By learning this now, maybe it will help you throughout your life."

Mayor ran the mile in 13 minutes in junior high, last year got down to the nine-minute range and this year has improved to 8:10. She says she wouldn't have taken up the activity without PE classes and believes her improvement has carried over into her academics.

"You see yourself improving, and it gives you more confidence," Mayor says. "I think that confidence helps me with studying, just because you feel better about yourself and you want to do better and you want to try harder."

Sophomore Nadine Youssef also has benefited in self-esteem. "It makes me happier with myself that I'm exercising regularly and taking care of myself," Youssef says.

OVERCOMING THE PAST

The Naperville schools use the computerized TriFIT health management system, made by HealthFirst. The software analyzes the students' performances and provides specific suggestions for continued improvement.

"That's so new and different," Youssef says. "You put in statistics about yourself and it can tell you what you need to exercise, what you need to work on individually."

Over the last two years, 40 schools have sent representatives to study Naperville's program.

But before the philosophy can spread, Lawler says, some built-in resistance has to be overcome.

"Probably 60% of our population had real bad experiences in PE, and those people are now our legislators, administrators and teachers," Lawler says. "I think there has to be a revolution at the university level to prepare teachers to teach 'the new PE.'"

One state where that's happening is Kansas.

In 1992 the Kansas Health Foundation challenged the state department of education to implement a curriculum that would teach skills for healthy lifestyles. It also has provided \$1.5 million in grants to the Physical Dimensions program now used at 148 middle schools and 152 high schools.

"It does take a lot of work to train teachers who have been out in the field for 20 years," Physical Dimensions director Bobbie Harris says. "It's hard to get them to change. But we haven't gotten anybody who has gone through the training and come back and said it doesn't work."

Some of the games might make a Vince Lombardi-style football coach wince.

There's lots of rope-jumping, Frisbee-throwing, scarf-juggling, hula hoops and even games of catch with rubber chickens.

"The whole time you're running and you're working as a team," Harris says. "Then we say, 'Oops, look, your heart rate is up.' We did line dancing at a high school the other day. Heart rates were up over 140 for 12 minutes, and it was fun and it was non-threatening."

The only criticism Harris has encountered is "some people think we're being soft on kids, but every kid is participating with his heart rate up."

As for the old, drill-sergeant approach to PE, Harris says, "The boot-camp thing didn't work, with push-ups as punishment or having them run a lap. 'Wait a minute. You want me to run, and yet you punish me with it?'"

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

For schools seeking modern equipment, the Bay Shore Union Free School District on Long Island, N.Y., suggests starting where health interests are highest: hospitals.

Bay Shore received \$20,000 grants from the Good Samaritan Hospital Medical Center in West Islip and from Southside Hospital in Bay Shore, plus \$15,000 worth of equipment.

Bay Shore educators have stressed overlapping their fitness efforts into other areas of academic study.

Use of computers and heart-rate monitors involves math; diet instruction involves science and nutrition; lessons on cardiovascular improvement deal with anatomy and physiology.

"We bring the real world into the classroom," Bay Shore athletic director Gene Gyer says. "What can be more real to a young person than their wellness?"--Tom Weir, USA Today

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OBESITY OF YOUTH IS 'EPIDEMIC'

"We're in the midst of an unprecedented epidemic of obesity among young people," says Howell Wechsler of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Division of Adolescent and School Health.

"It's been consistent in every demographic group you can imagine," Wechsler says.

Besides heart disease, increases in obesity also heighten risks of colon cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis and other diseases among young people, Wechsler says.

To reverse the trend, he says, "There's no magic bullet. It's going to take a lot of work. We see very clearly that something has to be done and that school education is a great vehicle to get something done, particularly because the field has matured so much over the last 30 years."

The decline in activity also might be affecting U.S. military forces.

"One of my perceptions is that with the decline of activity with today's youth, they're not coming in as fit as they were 10 and 15 years ago," says Col. Michael Malachowsky, commanding officer at the Parris Island, S.C., Marine Corps Recruit Depot that trains about 17,000 recruits every year.

"We get kids down here who haven't done much more than walk to school, if that," he says. "These kids are growing up on Whoppers and sodas."--Tom Weir

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HEART MONITORS MAKE KID'S PLAY SAFE

The tool that gets the most mention among advocates of "The New PE" is the heart-rate monitor.

By looking at a wristwatch display during exercise, students can make sure their pulse rates stay within a target zone that is active but short of exhaustion levels.

"We have to get the whole population to understand that this is a tachometer," says Tom McKoy, senior vice president for Polar Electro heart monitors. "A lot of people try to exercise and quickly become discouraged either because of discomfort or because they can't compete with the guy next to them. The first thing the heart monitor does is slow them down."

Polar Electro, a Finnish company, introduced the wireless devices, connected to a device worn around the chest, in 1979. It estimates that its products are used by 1 million U.S. students at 10,000 schools. Sophistication levels of monitors vary. The ones Polar Electro recommends for schools cost about \$125 and can record workout data.

Monitors aren't sold as a diagnostic tool, but usage in schools has led to early detection of heart problems.

Last year at Spring View Middle School in Huntington Beach, Calif., PE teacher Linda Ward noticed that a 12-year-old student, Megan Pulfer, had an unusually high heart rate while running--more than 200 beats a minute.

Pulfer, active in ballet, was considered fit. But a cardiology exam revealed a hole in her heart, which soon was corrected by surgery.

Phil Lawler, PE coordinator in Naperville, Ill., says his district's use of heart monitors has led to detecting some form of heart disease in at least six students.

"Tell me that the perspective of those parents on physical education didn't change in a moment," Lawler says.

Monitors also allow students to focus on their personal improvement, rather than gauge their performance against other children who initially might be far more fit.--Tom Weir

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STATE RULES VARY

The minimum PE required in each state in grades 9-12, in order to graduate from high school:

4 YEARS: 1 (Illinois)

2 YEARS: 6 (California, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, Virginia, Washington)

1-1/2 YEARS: 5 (Louisiana, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Wisconsin)

1 YEAR: 19 (Alabama, Alaska, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oregon, South Carolina, West Virginia)

HALF-YEAR: 6 (Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio)

NONE: 3 (Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee.)

STATES WHERE INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS SET MINIMUMS: 10 (Arizona, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Wyoming.)

NOTE: 21 states allow waivers, or substitutions, for the PE requirement for medical or religious reasons, varsity athletics, ROTC, marching band or other activities.

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