# Is Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) Participation an Equitable Substitution for an Alternative Physical Education Credit in High School?

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Abstract

As school districts nationwide struggle to raise academic achievement of students, an emphasis is made to increase the rigor of core subjects such as math, language arts, reading and writing. To balance the school day, courses such as physical education, health, and fine arts are given less prominence in scheduling. For physical education (PE), a remedy practiced by school districts is to allow alternative credit through participation in Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC), marching band, cheerleading, athletic teams, or community league sports (NASPE, 2012). Earlier research conducted by Lounsbery, Holt, Monnat, Funk, and McKenzie (2014) argue that substitution of PE credit through JROTC participation is not equitable. While the research conducted by Lounsbery, et al (2014) provides an objective argument, the scope of the study lacked a comprehensive lens to accurately evaluate the merits of JROTC as a viable substitution for PE credit.

Keywords: JROTC, Physical Education, physical activity, credit substitution

## Introduction

School districts nationwide have focused on improving student academic achievement by increasing emphasis on core subjects. With the advent of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001), school officials have placed significant effort in preparing their students to improve test scores on high stakes exams and hold schools accountable for their results (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007). When a number of states petitioned for waivers from NCLB, state officials were required to adopt an alternative form of testing. In the State of New Hampshire, public schools were required to participate in the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) in lieu of the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) (New Hampshire Department of Education, 2012).

With the increased demand for student achievement scores on high stakes exams, school officials have considered the option to allow substitute credit for non-core classes such as physical education, health, and fine arts. There is an argument that schools are given too much latitude in determining what activities are appropriate for substituting physical education credit (Kim, 2012; Lounsbery, et al. 2014; Rhea, 2009; Sims, 2011). The National Association of Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) is the national professional organization for physical educators. In their report, *Shape of the Nation* (2012), "More than half of all states (33 of 51 respondents) permit school districts or schools to allow students to substitute other activities for their required physical education credit" (p. 8). The leading substitute for eighteen states is student participation in JROTC (Sims, 2011).

Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) was established through the National Defense Act of 1916 under United States Code Title 10 which U.S. Army JROTC (n.d.) states, "the purpose of Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps is to instill in students in United States

secondary educational institutions the value of citizenship, service to the United States, personal responsibility, and a sense of accomplishment" (para 1). JROTC programs are established throughout the United States as well as Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools located in United States, Germany, Italy, Korea, and Japan (DoDEA, n.d.). JROTC programs are sponsored by their host services; Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and Coast Guard. In total, JROTC programs are established in 3,408 secondary schools with the Army JROTC sponsoring 1,731 programs (U.S. Army JROTC, n.d.).

## Physical Activity as a Lifelong Endeavor

Research relating to the benefits of physical education focus on wellness, disease prevention, obesity, and promoting lifelong fitness habits (Barney, Pleban, Wilkinson & Prusak, 2015; Masurier & Corbin, 2006; Mears, 2008; NASPE, 2012; Rickard & Banville, 2006). Many will argue that maintaining a healthy lifestyle is vital for longer life. Yet, adolescents are experiencing a stage of development that can set the path for an active or sedentary lifestyle. Therefore, one would suggest that physical education is critical for high school-aged students. So how can school officials justify the substitution of physical education credit? As reported by NASPE (2012), twenty-eight states allow for exemptions for physical education credit. Thirty-three states allow schools or school districts to approve alternative programs for physical education credit. With increased demands for academic achievement, school officials are looking at alternative programs for physical education credit.

## JROTC as an Equitable Substitute for Physical Education?

A study conducted by Lounsbery, et al (2014) investigated the rationale for schools allowing substitution for PE credit. Lounsbery, et al (2014) stated,

> "The bases or criteria used to determine approved substitutions are unclear, with most states simply listing approved substitutions. One rationale for the appropriateness of substitute programs is that the alternative program provides physical activity at levels found in PE and provides content that meets state or national PE standards" (p. 415).

The research conducted by Lounsbery, et al (2014) observed PE classes and JROTC classes for one week in four high schools that offered both programs. By using the System for Observed Fitness Instruction Time (SOFIT) instrument, the researchers compared the Moderate to Vigorous Physical Activity (MVPA) of both classes. Their results found increased MVPA with PE students and lower MVPA of JROTC students in the same school. The conclusion stated by Lounsbery, et al (2014) posit, "Students in JROTC, and perhaps other alternative programs, are less likely to accrue health-supporting physical activity and engage in fewer opportunities to be physically fit and motorically skilled" (p. 414).

While the researchers acknowledge that their study was not generalizable, they affirm that the observation period was limited to one week at each of the four high schools. With this limited time, conclusions drawn may lack reliability throughout the entire 3,408 JROTC programs.

## A New Hampshire JROTC Model for Equitable PE Substitution

The State of New Hampshire has ten JROTC programs in secondary schools. The Air Force sponsors the majority with five programs, followed by Army and Navy with two each, and the Marine Corps sponsoring one program. For the purpose of the article, this author will use suppositions to view the study conducted by Lounsbery, et al (2014) from a comprehensive lens. The expectation is to add value to a published study, and provide evidence that may alter the results depicted from that research.

The study conducted by Lounsbery, et al (2014) observed PE and JROTC students in four urban high schools located in the southwestern United States. Their conclusion was that JROTC students do not achieve similar levels of MVPA as their PE counterparts. While the evidence provided by Lounsbery, et al (2014) reveals lower levels of MVPA than PE classes, they do state, "implementation may vary by school to school, district to district, and state to state; thus, the greatly contrasting differences in the physical activity and lesson context we found in JROTC and PE in this study may not be generalizable" (p. 417). Secondly, Lounsbery, et al (2014) add, "There is a great need to develop a strong evidence base that prevents the further erosion of student enrollment in PE, and we hope this study will inspire replications and a broad line of research that compares physical activity in PE and other courses commonly substituted for PE" (p. 418). This article intends to add to this body of knowledge and provide evidence of JROTC meeting the requirements for equitable substitution for PE.

The two Army JROTC programs in New Hampshire are considered acceptable substitutions for PE credit at their respective high schools. According to NASPE (2012), the State of New Hampshire Department of Education has the following requirements for physical education credit:

1. Each student must earn 1 credit for physical education in secondary school;
2. PE course substitutions are permissible and determined by local schools and school districts. Limited options can be considered for course substitution. Interscholastic team participation is not permissible.
3. Exemptions/waivers for PE credit must be approved by the Office of the Commissioner of Education.

4. NH has implemented its own six PE curriculum guidelines (NH Department of Education, Physical Education Curriculum, 2012).
5. Physical Educators must be certified in the PE specialization at the secondary school level. (NASPE, State Profile, 2012).

The two secondary schools that offer PE credit substitution through Army JROTC also have additional prerequisites before PE credit can be awarded. The following is an excerpt from the school Program of Studies handbook (2015) provided to each student from one of these schools (Program of Studies- Curriculum Information and Planning Guide for Students, Parents, and Teachers (2015) :

JROTC Physical Education: 1 credit

Cadets may elect to have JROTC credit count as a Physical Education credit. To be eligible all of the following is required:

- Successful completion of two full years of JROTC;
- Active and consistent participation in the JROTC physical fitness program for two years and pass the Presidential Physical Fitness Test;
- Active and consistent participation on a JROTC team for two years;
- The cadet maintains a personal log/record of all team practices and competitions, of all physical fitness activities, and of all Presidential Physical Fitness Test scores (p. 59).

From the requirements listed for PE credit substitution through JROTC, many of the factors of concern by Lounsbery, et al (2014) are addressed. In addition, the JROTC instructors at this high school are both certified PE teachers in the State of New Hampshire. While the research conducted by Lounsbery, et al (2014) offers insight into the potential lack of equitable

levels of MVPA at their sample schools, the New Hampshire school requirements listed may alleviate the difference in MVPA.

Reviewing the Program of Studies (2015), students who contract for PE credit must be enrolled in JROTC for a minimum of two years. Not only will the JROTC student be continuing their PE curriculum an additional year, this added time may be more beneficial in establishing long-term physical activity habits. Secondly, earning a PE credit through JROTC requires successfully passing the Presidential Physical Fitness Test. This assessment tool measures student's muscular strength, muscular endurance, body composition, aerobic activity, and body composition (The Presidents Challenge, n.d.). Third, JROTC participants pursuing PE credit must also participate and compete on a JROTC team(s) for two years. These teams may include drill and ceremony, Color Guard, Adventure, and orienteering. Most of these team seasons practice and compete for three months. Color Guard teams typically practice and compete yearlong (U.S. Army JROTC, n.d.). Lastly, each JROTC cadet pursuing PE credit must maintain a physical fitness log/record of all of their physical activity for the two years. This is accomplished on the Presidents Challenge website where students can accrue points for national awards for fitness activity participation and achievement. Considering the comprehensiveness of all requirements to satisfy earning a PE credit through JROTC, this alternative path may result in increased MVPA, a nationally recognized assessment tool, and discipline to monitor all physical activities.

While Lounsbery, et al (2014) made credible conclusions from their study, it is also apparent that the scope of the study was limited. As mentioned earlier, a goal for physical educators is to develop habits for healthy and active lifestyles. Mears (2008), advocates that effective physical educators promote activities that may continue into young adulthood. This

could be accomplished by promoting less traditional activities such as aquatics, outdoor activities, and physical conditioning. Additional research supports the importance of increasing interest and MVPA in activities to encourage lifelong activities (Barney, et al 2015; Beyer, 2008; Cardinal, Yan Zin, & Cardinal, 2013; Masurier, & Corbin, 2006).

Advocating for increased MVPA outside of the classroom is another goal for physical educators. Faber, Kulinna, and Darst (2007) relating to physical education promotion, "It is important, however, to advocate for another aspect of the program that teachers are trying to promote: physical activity outside of the classroom" (p. 27). Classroom time is precious minutes to accomplish MVPA, lesson context, and other requirements. Promoting MVPA outside of the classroom is beneficial to the whole child. With JROTC, students are required to not only participate in the daily classwork and physical activities, but also participate in the JROTC team requirement.

Lastly, JROTC students who are required to participate in the Presidents Fitness Challenge Test, are encouraged to select physical activities that are rather extensive. For example, skiing, yoga, walking, gymnastics, hiking, and cardio activities are a small sample of more than 120 examples (The Presidents Challenge, n.d.). The goal is to offer a number of activities where each child should find some activities that interest them. It is personalized and motivation is increased by student interest.

## Conclusion

Physical educators are professionals that take pride in their vocation not unlike any other teaching professional. Physical education has a value-added component to promote a healthy lifestyle, healthy immune system, stronger bones, and the reduction of youth obesity (Kim, 2012). Physical educators advocate for their students to continue their active lifestyles outside of

the classroom and after graduation. Students who live sedentary lifestyles will most likely continue this into young adulthood (Mears, 2008). NASPE (2012) stated, “Research shows a real link between quality physical education and present and future physical activity participation” (p. 3). Educators are empowered to prepare their students for life after graduation. Physical educators have the same objective.

The JROTC program is a common substitute for PE credit in eighteen states. While the Army JROTC has a curriculum that is used in all 1,731 programs, each program is unique due to demographics, region, and individual instructor pedagogy. This is not unlike any State curriculum standards, district policies, or physical educator pedagogy. Each program brings its own unique style and expectations.

The study conducted by Lounsbery, et al (2014) produced results that were fitting for the scope of the study. What this author believes is that the study failed to observe their JROTC programs through a comprehensive lens. What if that school district required JROTC participants to participate in additional criteria to earn the PE credit? If this assumption was true, then the study would be missing critical components of what makes PE substitution equitable. However, this information is not available. Therefore, the assumption made by this author is to investigate whether the JROTC program in New Hampshire selected met the rigor for completing the equivalency requirement for PE credit. In this situation, the assumption would be that this selected JROTC program exceeded the school PE requirement.

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