



STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE

Physical Activity Opportunities Before and After School

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Addressing the “activity deficit” means reaching students before and after school.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2006) recommend that children and adolescents participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity most days of the week, preferably daily. Further, children and young people can choose any type of moderate- or higher-intensity physical activity—such as brisk walking, playing tag, jumping rope, or swimming—as long as it adds up to at least one hour a day. When measuring accumulated activity with a pedometer, the recommended daily step targets for elementary school children are 12,000 steps a day for girls and 15,000 steps a day for boys (Tudor-Locke et al., 2004). A number of programs are now available in which school students can log their physical activity steps and miles (see, for example, PE Central’s Log It program, at www.peclogit.org/logit.asp).

It is notable, however, that many young people are not achieving these activity targets, and while many villains have been listed as the culprits (such as television and video games), the jury is still out on this issue. As Gard and Wright (2005) commented, “...the relationships between television and overweight is at best extremely complicated or at worse tenuous” (p. 60).

What is not disputable, however, is the fact that nearly all young people attend schools and that schools offer all students access to physical activity. In addition, schools are well equipped to provide children with knowledge *about* being physically active, as well as *opportunities to become* active through physical education. Nonetheless, the available evidence suggests that few physical education lessons reach the *Healthy People 2010* goal of 50 percent of lesson time spent in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (Levin, McKenzie, Hussey, Kelder, & Lytle, 2001; McKenzie, Marshall, Sallis, & Conway, 2000). This shows that a quality physical education program alone is not enough to address the physical activity deficit.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to outline potential opportunities for children to be physically active beyond physical education. The article will follow a chronological progression through a school day and will examine where enjoyable physical activity can be promoted before school, during school hours, and after the formal school day ends.

The Walking School Bus

Thirty-seven years ago, the sight of children walking or biking to school was common. In fact, 87 percent of children who lived within a mile of school used active transportation (i.e., walking or bicycling) as their primary mode of travel in 1970 (Beschen, 1972). In recent years, this percentage has “turned upside-down” with 87 percent of students now either riding in buses (52%) or being driven (35%)—in other words, only 13 percent of children today walk or bike to school (New York City Department of Transportation, 2007; School Transportation News, 2006).

As a response to the call for increased activity, a worldwide phenomenon called

the “Walking School Bus” has developed. Practiced in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and European countries such as Great Britain and Germany, the Walking School Bus is simply a group of children walking to school with one or more adults. It can be as informal as two families taking turns walking their children to school or as structured as a route with meeting points, a timetable, and a regularly rotated schedule of trained volunteers. The Walking School Bus does not draw on the resources of any teacher in the school. All that is needed is a group of community members who volunteer their time and can ensure that children will walk with a group.

To illustrate how popular these Walking School Buses have become, we take an example from the Auckland (New Zealand) school district, where more than 86 schools conduct over 180 Walking School Buses that transport 3,006 children daily. Funding for this program comes from Infrastructure Auckland via RoadSafe Auckland. Each school is eligible for up to \$1,500 per route, on the condition that they keep the bus running for a minimum of two years (Auckland Regional Council, 2003).

The Walking School Bus can even be an effective means of transportation for students who live a substantial distance from the school. For example, such students can ride the motorized bus to a particular drop-off point and then walk the remaining distance to school. Given that it is not uncommon for students to begin classes some 30 or 40 minutes after they arrive at school, and spend that interim time sitting on the floor of the gym (or sitting at their desks), the time restrictions placed on a Walking School Bus will accommodate those who ride part of the segment to school and walk the remaining distance.

There have been reports of a number of subsidiary benefits to schools when they adopt a Walking School Bus. These include reduced chaos and traffic congestion around schools (better for the environment and safety), decreased crime because more people are outside keeping an eye on their neighborhood, and increased community cohesion because neighbors get to know one another.

Research on Walking School Buses also shows changes in students’ attitudes towards physical activity. Essentially, those children who use a Walking School Bus learn to view physical activity as a natural part of life.

Intramural Sports Programs

Before the increase in the number of students participating in interscholastic sports (following Title IX legislation), many students took part in school intramural programs. That is, students who were not on varsity teams could participate in extracurricular physical activities. Intramural programs, the literal definition of which means “inside the walls,” involve activities that are conducted less formally than and separately from varsity athletics. The aim of an intramural sports program is to provide an opportunity for all individuals to participate no matter what their level of ability.

Because the structure of interscholastic sports in the



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Children walking to school were a common sight before safety concerns vastly diminished their number. Now the “Walking School Bus,” groups of children walking to school with adult supervision, aims to restore the popularity of this healthful activity.

United States follows an elitist model and coaches now receive higher priority, there has been a significant reduction in the number of teachers available to conduct intramural programs (Stewart, 2005). Nonetheless, an intramural sports program provides an opportunity for young people, who might not be otherwise engaged in sport, to benefit from participating in physical activity and in a socially rewarding experience that may encourage them to participate later in life. Moreover, such programs seem to be popular. The intramural softball fields of the author’s institution are fully occupied in five time slots every night of the week during the spring, with over 300 teams and 3,000 students participating in the various leagues.

While the format of intramural competitions would appear to be labor intensive (with administration, officiating, and scheduling time requirements), the research on Sport Education has shown that students do indeed have the capacity to organize and manage their activity experiences, as long as they are given opportunities to assume leadership positions and learn roles (Siedentop, Hastie, & van der Mars, 2004). Although it is not the purpose of this article to describe Sport Education in full, the structure of that particular model could serve as an example of how intramurals could be reconfigured within schools. Students could serve on a board that oversees the progress of a season by updating league tables and allocating student officials, so that the adult responsible for the intramural program would essentially take the role of commissioner or league manager. Teachers could also roster off, so that the same teacher need not attend each day.

Out-of-School Activity Prompts

Since physical education and physical activity promotion are the responsibility of physical educators, it is particularly surprising that very few of them prompt their students to stay active outside of physical education class (McKenzie et

al., 1997). What is more surprising is that such a prompt does not need to be sophisticated or time consuming. The important thing is the encouragement the prompt creates. The following four prompts are simple examples of how teachers can reinforce physical education topics for reference beyond the lesson (Hastie & Martin, 2006).

Example 1. “Today we worked on striking with a flat paddle, and I’m going to give you a challenge. I’d like to see if everyone could ask their mom or dad to make them a paddle using an old coat hanger and a nylon stocking. I’ve given you the directions in your folders to take home. I am also going to give everyone a balloon that they can use to strike with the new home-made paddle. You can keep your paddle at home and use it to practice.”

Example 2. “Boys and girls, yesterday we practiced taking our arms way back when we were tossing underhand. Who asked someone to practice with them during recess?”

Example 3. “Today we practiced jumping for height. I wonder if everyone in the class has a place at home where they can practice after school. See if you can get three friends or brothers or sisters and find a place where you can all mark your highest jump. See if you can jump higher than your mom!”

Example 4. “Girls and boys, yesterday I scored 11,250 steps on my pedometer. Can anyone tell me what the target for adults is? That’s right, it’s 10,000 steps. Now, some of you indicated that your mom or dad had recently bought a pedometer. Would all of you remember to check with them



Offering intramural sports would give all students, regardless of ability, the opportunity to participate in an enjoyable physical activity.

about their scores today, and even better, offer to go for a walk with them if they are under 10,000?”

Local Facility Promotion

Walk into any school after the final lesson, and most physical activity spaces will be bustling with varsity sport teams. Weight rooms, gymnasias, and outside fields and courts will see a small percentage of a school’s population engaged in some form of health-enhancing activity.

Although it is heartening to see so many students actively using school facilities, some individuals have no access. As a result of this facility deficit, those students who wish to be active, but do not play on school teams, have very limited opportunities to use school property. One compensatory action that teachers can take is to help these students identify activity locations that are available outside of the school environment. Each school should have a list of the nearby venues at which young people can participate. The list that follows presents the key questions that teachers might ask when investigating these spaces:

- What is the site address and location?
- For which children is this really accessible (i.e. could they actually get to the facility independent of caregivers)?
- What facilities are available at the site?
- What are the hours of availability?
- What programs are offered (if any)?
- What is the cost (if any) for participants?

From these data, teachers could prepare documentation or displays that alert children at their school to different activity opportunities. Initial research on these out-of-school facilities has shown that boys and girls who use them show significant improvement in body composition, strength, and endurance. Further, many girls have expressed more confidence in continuing to exercise despite potential difficulties (Annesi, Westcott, Faigenbaum, & Unruh, 2005).

A School Health Club

This final section presents a radical (but not so far-fetched) notion. Should the common idea of formalized high school physical education be abandoned and replaced with a school fitness and sports club (Hastie, 2003)? In other words, rather than teachers being direct activity leaders in units of team sports, they would assume the role of resident activity expert. Their expertise would be available to the school community through a number of activity options, similar to those that are offered at the local YMCA or private health club.

Setting up a school fitness and health club would mean that the facility in which it is housed is open not only during school hours, but also before and after classes. This would make the facility more accessible to more students as well as to faculty and staff.

Given this arrangement, there may be a time during the day when no activity is scheduled, but some areas of the fitness and sports club may still be available for self-directed activities such as jogging or pick-up basketball. Obviously the teacher’s workday would be affected by this schedule.



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Establishing a school fitness and health club would provide another means of promoting physical activity among students.

Since the facility is open for longer than the regular school hours, it is possible for one teacher to work the early morning shift and be finished with his or her commitment by early afternoon. Another teacher may not arrive at school until the late morning, but will be on site until the early evening. These teachers may also need to rearrange their schedules in response to other aspects of their employment, such as coaching. A teacher involved in football during the fall semester may work the early schedule during August through December and be finished by lunch. In this way, the physical education teacher has the afternoon to prepare as a coach for practice, to scout, or do other coaching-related tasks. Likewise, this same teacher may work only the afternoon sessions in the spring.

Summary

This article has focused on the promotion of physical activity outside of school hours. The school plays a critical role in this endeavor by providing space, equipment, and activities, and by educating students about participation in community or intramural club activities and encouraging them to do so. Though many schools have vibrant and well-funded interscholastic sport programs, this article has focused on the school's role in offering activities that meet the needs, interests, and abilities of *all* students, including boys, girls,

students with disabilities, and students with special health-care needs.

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