**A World Without Physical Education**

**By Derek Byrne**

****  The curtain has fallen on physical education in the public school setting. Therefore, the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD) and its 20,000 members have lost their battle to keep physical education in public schools. The change as had a huge impact on professionals in the field who believed they were making strides towards combating the childhood obesity epidemic and increasing their students’ overall physical activity levels.

 For many passionate physical educators, the realization that they will no longer be preparing and planning for a new school year with their students has yet to hit home. The structure and organization for how we teach and promote healthy choices and active lifestyles among our adolescent population has changed forever.

There are a variety of reasons why physical education was eliminated from the public school setting. The driving force was legislation and a nationwide urgency to improve math and reading scores for our country’s youth. Over the last few years, the United States of America has continued to dip well below other countries in their academic achievement scores on statewide-standardized tests. This has resulted in an increased pressure placed on school district personnel and administrative leaders to produce higher levels of academic achievement among their student population.

As schools continued to fall below the goals and standards set by the state, many schools were placed on school improvement plans and administrators were put on high alert to increase academic achievement or risk losing their jobs. This led to many administrators crying out to district and state officials that students needed increased math and reading time to help promote higher levels of learning and achievement. The enhanced emphasis being placed towards math and reading helped to cast one the first stones that led to the demise of public school physical education and health.

As many school districts looked to restructure their curriculum and increase math and reading time for students, they also faced added pressure in statewide cuts to funding for education. This placed district officials and personnel in tough positions as they had to look for areas to cut to help fit within their economic budget for the upcoming school year. Budget levels were tightening and district officials needed to explore different ways to make their budget work. The result was a systematic review of the structure of schools and how they could best promote academic achievement for the future.

Of course, when financial cuts are about to take place in the educational landscape the first place they often look at is specialists. The content areas of physical education, art, music and library were thoroughly reviewed and specialists were asked to produce evidence of student learning. This caused a ripple effect felt nationwide as many physical educators and other specialists were unable to provide evidence of student learning due to a lack of assessments or specific curriculum and objectives they were teaching towards.

Many physical educators were grading solely on effort and others had no rubrics or criteria for what they were looking for in their students when they were conducting skill assessments. Combine that with the fact that during the review process physical educators, teachers and administrators were asked how their specialists helped promote student learning outside of their content area and the answer that they provided demonstrated that many physical educators were not actively involved in the school learning community outside of class.

The review demonstrated poor evidence of student learning, a lack of student assessment, varied physical education curriculums, poor class structures and a lack of impact on student learning outside of the class setting. Respect for physical educators in the school setting decreased and for those who demonstrated high quality programs, the lack of evidence being provided by other educators within the field was truly devastating.

In many fields, when jobs and professional livelihoods are threatened there is a quick and calculated response. In fact, many professional organizations and advocates work to plan for the future and secure their position by demonstrating and providing evidence that validates their role and impact in a specific setting. In physical education and health there are those that are involved and advocate for their future and there are those who stand idle and watch the world develop around them. The lack of participation nationwide and at the state level really hurt the advocacy efforts of physical education as it was being removed from the school setting. An organization is only as strong as it’s participants and for AAHPERD, NASPE and statewide physical education organizations too many physical educators were not involved in the drive to protect our future.

The fact that physical educators never banded together to secure the importance of being highly qualified to teach physical education and health helped demonstrate that they were easily replaceable. In addition, not being involved in professional organizations demonstrated a low level of participation in professional development opportunities. These professional development opportunities were seen as essential to a teacher’s growth and development. The lack of effort and participation in advocacy efforts was a failing of many of the physical educators within the field.

The final step, in the dropping of physical education can be seen through the lack of accountability. There was no nationwide curriculum that was enforced and this led to a variety of curriculums and objectives being taught. In addition, administrators and school officials never asked or requested evidence of student learning in physical education and this led to many poor physical educators coasting through their lessons without developing appropriate lessons or assessments to track student learning and plan accordingly for future lessons.

Also, across the country the amount of time being spent participating and engaging in physical education classes varied widely. This led to challenging situations, as many physical educators struggled to promote physical activity because they did not see their students enough to help them reach or even come near the recommended national guidelines for youth. There are a variety of reasons that the public school setting will no longer involve physical education, but most of the blame can be focused on the lack of professionalism and commitment seen in many of the physical educators themselves.

As physical education fell from the graces of public schools, advocacy efforts to promote active and healthy choices for children did not go unheard. Combined with the voice of AAHPERD and NASPE came the “Let’s Move” initiative created by former first lady Michelle Obama, the “PLAY 60” campaign of the NFL, and efforts from a variety of health organizations including the CDC and the United States Department of Health and Human Services. These organizations and others voiced urgency about the growing childhood obesity epidemic and the need to find alternative methods for promoting physical activity and healthy choices outside of the school setting. The result was high levels of collaboration, communication and discussion to search for ways to promote healthy and active lifestyles outside of school.

Ultimately, this led to the creation of a task force by the president in an effort to create new strategies and a comprehensive plan for solving obesity and its negative health consequences, and promoting active and healthy lifestyles outside of the school setting.

The task force was made up of high-qualified physical educators who had been pinpointed for their exceptional physical education programs, advocacy involvement, grant work received, professional development, and their innovative ideas demonstrated within the physical education setting. The task force also included doctors who specialized in youth health, community leaders, fitness professionals, business leaders, government officials, grant writers, university professors, coaches and researchers.

The task force included a panel of parents who were asked to provide input into how their needs could best be met to provide a solid physical and nutritional foundation for their children. The task force developed proposals and a nationwide business model was created and through a variety of methods. These included a government allocation, grant funding, an increase in state tourism taxing, and donations from businesses such as Nike, Adidas, Microsoft, Subway and others who saw the opportunity to profit from involvement.

The result was the creation of a company that employed former high quality physical education teachers as the part of a formal review process. They also employed fitness professionals, and coaches who all would be highly trained and led through an educational procedure that would stress the core message of the company which was “promote childhood physical activity to the highest level, build skills that promote future involvement in fitness, and increase the understanding of what it takes to make healthy choices.” This message would be delivered at the elementary level through a team of physical educators and fitness professionals who provided before and after school physical activity and educational opportunities to students. The message would also be delivered through weekend physical activity and physical education camps that allowed students the opportunity to be active on the weekends and learn a variety of different lifelong lessons and core fitness values outside of school time.

In addition, school breaks would be supplemented with physical education and physical activity camps that allowed for quality and extensive learning and physical activity time. Family and community physical education events were also being put into place each month to help promote active families and increase the understanding of what it takes to make health conscious decisions in the best interested of their family.

The task force also began putting measures into place that would allow fitness and health programs to be sustainable within the community. Community fitness centers were planned, developed and built to increase physical activity opportunities for the community. Parks and recreational areas were enhanced through grants and funding that allowed for the building and implementation of skate parks, tracks, climbing walls, obstacle courses, bike paths, playing areas and other physical activity resources.

In addition, a partnership was built with the company “Polar,” who helped provide accelerometers to students in a nationwide research study to get valuable feedback on students’ physical activity levels. This also allowed the task force and its business to pinpoint students who needed additional training and activity sessions outside of the school day.

At the secondary level, the “School Sports” model was moved to a “Club Sport” model. Teaching and coaching role were separated and coaches were hired outside of their teaching roles. They were then trained and evaluated to create an important separation between teaching and coaching responsibilities. This not only allowed teachers to be more professional and committed to their teaching practices, but also weeded out teachers whose focus was primarily on coaching. The “Club Sports” model allowed for sports to be “no cut.” This permitted higher levels of participation, variation of skill levels, and participants played for longer periods of time, and even stayed active within this model into adulthood with adult recreational leagues. All secondary students were still required to take part in nutrition and health courses within the school setting. All students, even those who participated in the “Club Sport” were required to use the newly enhanced “Nike Fuel” wristband. This wristband recorded physical activity throughout the day and could be downloaded and tracked through an application on their phones and through a computer to input into the physical activity research database. This band also worked as a membership card for entry into community fitness centers and a variety of evening and weekend physical activity classes provided through the local fitness centers, intramural programs and outdoor activity centers.

The research developed through this physical activity tracking helped the task force develop and enhance new ways of promoting physical activity to the highest level among the secondary population in the future.

 “Outdoor Recreation Centers’” were developed to offer youth options for being active outside of a fitness center and or sports program. The “Outdoor Centers” provide participants with a variety of options for being physically active outside such as: group hikes, mountain climbing, bicycle riding, rollerblading, ice-skating, skateboarding, snowboarding and skiing. These opportunities were provided through grants from REI, The North Face, K2, Burton, the LiveStrong Foundation and various other physical activity companies.

The “Outdoor Center” also worked with an organization that specialized in “GPS” equipment to teach the activity “Orienteering.” The goal of this option was to have youth work together in a cooperative setting while improving their physical fitness. In addition, fitness areas were built nationwide with indoor swimming pools within the community. These swimming areas offered classes that focused on swimming, water safety, CPR courses and a small wave pool that helped with teaching and simulating the experience of surfing and body boarding.

The new youth physical activity plan built a sense of community and cooperation through dancing. Large group and small group dances were taught on a weekly basis. Everything from “Zumba,” to Hip Hop, to a variety of other new dances were taught and performed to help increase physical activity levels. One exciting feature of this new physical activity implementation was the creation all of a community wide approach to provide a variety of new and exciting learning opportunities for the next generation. Staying current with music, different types of dances, and new ideas were essential to making this feature of the physical activity program successful. Believing that every individual could find at least one of physical activity personally enjoyable, by providing choices and opportunities the new physical activity program helped students find and participate in that area.

The physical education and physical activity setting for promoting youth health had been totally changed. Physical education had been eliminated from the school setting, but the same leaders who demonstrated a commitment to their students, dedication to their teaching practices and passion for their content areas found new opportunities to make a difference within this emerging business model.

Looking back, many people still believed that schools served as a perfect platform for teaching students the importance of being physically active. But the public perception of physical education had irreversibly changed. Physical education professionals needed to change and adapt. The best businesses transform and adapt with changing times. Physical educators had to do the same. Through a collaborative and comprehensive approach physical educators now worked with a variety of different professionals to help create experiences that truly made a difference for the next generations of youth.

Derek Byrne is a physical education teacher at Midway Elementary School in the Highline School District. He has taught for close to six years and has learned a lot through his work with educators, staff and students in both the Northshore and Highline School Districts. During his teaching career he has strived to make a difference in his students lives through his work to develop comprehensive physical education programs and create new learning and physical activity opportunities for his students. He has also strived to grow and improve as a professional by serving on the WAHPERD executive board and through his recent progression through Central Washington University's Masters in Physical Education and Health program.