

Reshaping Physical Education for the 21st Century: The Fitness Factor

~ by Diane
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Rational movement has been linked to brain development (Hannaford, 1995), physical fitness has been tied to higher academic performance (Ragland, 2001), and thinkers throughout history have known that *Mens sana in corpore sano* is much more than an enduring Latin maxim. In 2001, for instance, the California Department of Education reported that a statewide physical fitness assessment of more than 1 million students in grades 5, 7 and 9 showed that over 80% of them scored below acceptable fitness standards. When academic performance was compared with the fitness scores, a clear correlation between academic success and physical fitness was found at all three grade levels (Ragland, 2001). (See *Photo 1*.)

Obesity gets much of the attention, but steadily declining youth physical fitness has also emerged in the headlines. American youth are growing more inert, malformed and clumsy. Even our homeland security is threatened as physical, mental, and moral deficiencies preclude more than seven out of ten Americans between the ages

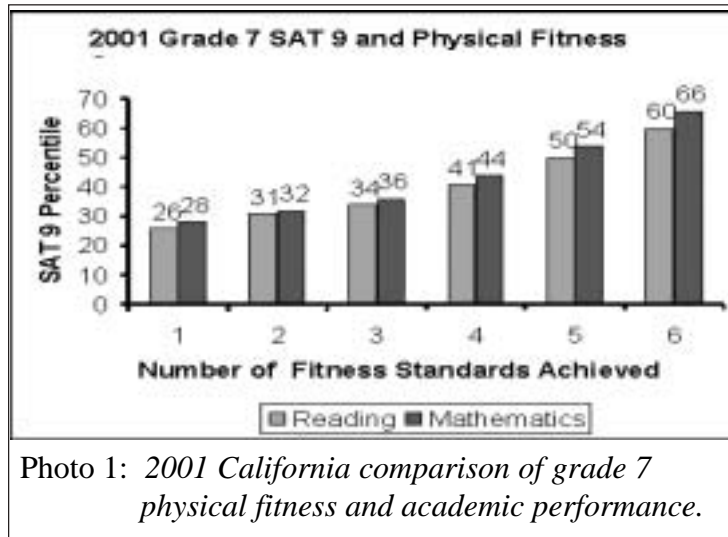


Photo 1: 2001 California comparison of grade 7 physical fitness and academic performance.

of 17 and 24 from serving in our military (Hafemeister, 2006). Physical educators are under pressure to focus less on sports, games, and leisure activities and more on fitness-based instruction. A look back suggests that this may not be an easy transition.

Pre-1920's physical education was heavily influenced by the medical community, and it focused on education *of the physical*. In other words, the earlier classical systems were aimed at building physically articulate, well-formed, and organically sound men and women who could move well both on and off the ground. Then came the New Physical Education (Wood & Cassidy, 1927) of the 1920's with a shift toward education *through the physical*. The kinder/gentler lifetime activities approach denounced the highly structured physical training systems brought to the United

States throughout much of the 1800's by immigrants from Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Czechoslovakia and other nations (Siedentop, 2007). (See *Photo 2*.)

World War II brought the sobering realization that our nation was physically unprepared. Dr. Walter Truslow (1943), a highly respected orthopedic surgeon during those years, wrote:

"In the latter part of the last century, more or less adequate physical training had an important place in the programs of our primary and secondary schools . . . Since then school-yard games, rhythmic dancing and more general participation in athletics, valuable as they are, have gradually superseded

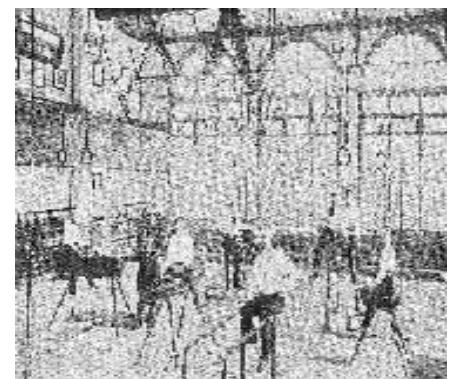


Photo 2: The old physical education was highly sophisticated at the turn-of-the-century.

the scientific posture training and body-building programs . . .” (pp. vii-viii).

Many physical educators during and after WWII, including Iowa native Mabel Lee, called for more attention to body mechanics and conditioning. “Our physical education programs in high schools and colleges have been a miserable failure. Physical education through play must be discarded and a more rugged program substituted” (Bank, as cited in Lee and Wagner, 1949, pp. 7-8).



Photo 3: *Mabel Lee*

In a high school physical education teachers’ manual issued by the Iowa Department of Public Instruction (1945), the State clearly calls for the same reforms today’s physical educators are facing. Much of the manual is given to conditioning drills, good posture, and corrective exercise. The need to deemphasize recreational sports and games is clearly articulated in the following passage:

“The high schools have usually failed to face reality as to their contributions to possible future adult physical education and recreation. They have generally assumed that if the major emphasis in high school physical education was on individual and team sports, such as tennis, golf, badminton, archery, volleyball, and softball, training in these sports would carry over into good and adequate after-school habits of recreation and exercise. All of the surveys have shown that this supposition is not true; and, moreover, if the training in sports did so carry over, in almost no community are there enough facilities for such recreation to accommodate 5 percent of the eighteen to forty-five year-old population. Yet this type of program for the high schools and colleges has been almost solely emphasized, and, as a result, physical education has, as a profession, done very little for the adult, after-school-age population; and the literature is strangely silent on methods for solving this problem” (p. 263).

Despite these calls for reform, widespread change did not occur; sports continued to dominate physical education curricula. As the noted orthopedic specialist Dr. Hans Kraus discovered over fifty years ago, mainstream physical educators have a long tradition of disdain for teaching exercise. Kraus and his research team reported in the early 1950’s that American youth were far less fit

than their European peers. This led President Dwight Eisenhower to create the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. Kraus urged American physical educators to begin teaching rational exercise, but the mainstream rejected his advice and continued focusing on sports, games, and leisure activities. Kraus (1965) later wrote:

“At the time I simply did not realize that many physical educators had such an ingrained dislike of exercise. I found this out in 1957, when I attended a meeting with a number of physical educators. It was a very friendly session. After a few minutes we got down to the main problem. I asked, ‘Why are you against exercise?’

“‘We can’t use exercises,’ one physical educator said.

“‘Why not?’ I asked.

He smiled. ‘Very simple,’ he said, ‘Twenty-five years ago we gave exercises to school children. And as far as I’m concerned, that’s enough. We were looked down on as the boobs of the school system. We had no status at all. So we changed our emphasis. Now who are we? Well, we’re not the boobs we used to be. We’re respected members of the academic community. We’re educators, physical educators if you wish. We’re not ‘exercise teachers’ any more. We’re educators, coaches,

and administrators. You want to know the truth? Exercise is finished! It's passé. It's out of date. You want us to turn back the clock. Well, I'm telling you doctor, we don't care what your findings show, we're not going back to the old days. We've worked hard to get where we are, and we're going to stay there." (pp. 49-50)



Photo 4: *Poorly performed*

President John F. Kennedy believed that "intelligence and skill can only function at the peak of their capacity when the body is healthy and physically fit" (Arnheim and Sinclair, 1975, p 175). Thus Kennedy added his political muscle to a national effort aimed at improving youth fitness. However there was little change in the last half of the century; until recently, sports, games, and leisure activities endured and remained the dominant feature of physical education curricula.

Today many physical education programs are beginning to emphasize "functional fitness" (Wuest and Bucher, 2003). The methods, materials and motivators of functional fitness resemble the

pre-1920's physical education, are linked again to health and medicine, and are widely used by physical therapists, fitness professionals and coaches. Education of the physical is re-emerging in physical education programs across the State, giving new meaning and life to the timeless advice of Lee and Wagner (1949):

"True it is that many teachers loudly applaud the virtue of a physical education that is purely recreational in nature, labeling themselves 'advanced thinkers' or 'leaders of a new day.' But the teacher who feels real concern for the proper physical development of her pupils as well as for their education for the future recreational hours will not be intimidated by false philosophies. She, in the best interests of the proper physical development of her pupils, will insist upon disciplined training of the body. Such training has a spiritual as well as physical value. Those persons who learned while young to discipline themselves through a knowledge of their needs and a willingness to sacrifice to meet these needs make up the best citizens of a democracy. It is the undisciplined who make up mobs" (p. 259).

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