

Accountability Means Quality Physical Activity

Ernest Holcomb

We have a big health problem in North Carolina and in our nation. The problem is that our children have become too big for their health. Reading the daily news or searching the internet offers all the facts necessary to support the need for Americans to move more and eat less. While we are at it, we could eat smarter, too. It is no surprise that schools are again the “chosen ones” to solve this super-sized problem; schools are the one common place where nearly all children spend a great deal of time in their formative years.

Understand that there are only three real determinates of health—heredity, personal choice, and environment. Research continues to show that attitudes and habits established early in life more often become adult lifestyle factors. Quality physical education, physical activity, and health education nurture positive attitudes towards physical fitness and wellness. What happens when students take part in a quality school-wide K-12 program to improve attitudes around physical activity? Decreased waistlines, improved academic performance, knowledgeable students/adults, and a better chance for a healthier state and nation. We can also expect reduced health care costs, increased student/employee productivity, and lower school and workplace absenteeism. In order to slay the childhood obesity monster in North Carolina, it is imperative that we understand the history of this giant.

Activity time in elementary school once meant recess where children played freely, with little organization. Organized physical education usually began for the child in middle grades and was a required yearly class. Some high schools required two or more units of physical education for graduation along with a unit of health education. With the expansion of college admission requirements in the 1970s, school boards began slicing units from nonacademic subjects. Sincere physical educators across the state were alarmed and objected while envisioning playgrounds with super-sized kids and oversized swings. For more than 30 years we have fought to reinstate those lost units of physical education in our schools.

In the early 1990s, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) began the long process of writing

an end of course (EOC) test for health and physical education (HPE). Initially, it would begin as a written test, but many physical educators saw it as a move that would eventually lead to a physical exit test as well. That effort ended after less than one year when the state department decided to reallocate monies to rewrite the biology EOC. To date, the HPE-EOC is still on a shelf somewhere in downtown Raleigh. In more recent years, we have seen middle school health and physical education classes slashed to make room for computer skills and other such requisites. We now find some middle schools facing gym classes of over a hundred students per period and some without health education being taught at all.

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The complexities continue to mount as we presently battle fast foods, poor nutritional habits in many homes, and kids who find more enjoyment playing with MP3 players and computers than playing with friends or in organized sports. Our schools are being driven by state test scores (EOGs and EOCs) and anything else that is required to justify state funds. At present, our state requires 150 minutes of physical education per week for elementary students (K-5) and 225 minutes of HPE per

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Use the Holistic Approach

Along with quality physical education and activity programs, children should receive quality health education. The two should complement each other and be taught holistically, interweaving topics from the classroom to the activity area. This holistic approach will strengthen student knowledge and assist in a view that health and wellness issues are important aspects of everyone's life. Since presenting at several state conventions, I am fully convinced that health and physical educators have some of the most creative minds among all disciplines. If we could harness the aptitude levels demonstrated during working sessions, health and physical educators can be the force that bonds all other subject areas in an interdisciplinary approach.

The American Association for Health Education (AAHE) also falls under the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance, and this organization, along with our state level North Carolina Association for the Advancement of Health Education and numerous government and private agencies, dedicate themselves to the ongoing work of health education. All that is needed is a click on the websites of these organizations and the time to research and/or request information.

Supporting agencies abound for physical activity, physical education, and health education from the local level to the state level and across the nation, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. With so much information available, we must stay updated and consistently communicate information to our students. Powerful lesson plans should be linked to the national and state standards; there is really no excuse for a sub par lesson to exist.

week for their middle and high school counterparts. In addition, it is advised that K-8 students add another 30 minutes of physical activity to the school day. While many principals work diligently with scheduling, others count those minute requirements like pennies in a poker game, astonishingly even counting the walk to and from the cafeteria as part of the weekly total.

To complicate matters further, many middle and high school administrators find it necessary to fill coaching voids with individuals willing to coach regardless of their teaching talents or interests. While some of our best coaches are also excellent, caring physical education and health educators with great impact on young people, in far too many schools we have the gyms filled with coaches waiting for the school day to end so they can get on to practice. To add insult to injury, the 225 minutes for high school students can only be reached if we do some creative computing due to block scheduling and a one

semester course that requires both academic (health) and activity (physical education) time.

While many parents see our outstanding athletes performing during sporting events, this provides a skewed view of the overall health status of our students. It is not the athletes who are most often at risk when studying childhood obesity charts; it's the average kid, the one who hops on a yellow bus or in a car at the end of each school day and moves little until the next morning. Our physical education and health education programs must be about all students, not just those valued on the athletic field or those who specialize in acquiring our attention.

To understand the needs of schools, we must first understand the difference in the terms involved. There is a difference between physical education and physical activity: "Physical activity is critical to the development and maintenance of good health. The goal of physical education is to develop physically educated individuals who have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to enjoy a lifetime of healthful physical activity."¹ We need to provide opportunities for physical activity in and out of the classroom. To be healthy, children need to move, and often this includes not only directed recreation, but also creative, passionate play. On the other hand, "quality physical education [will help] all children develop health-related fitness, physical competence, cognitive understanding, and positive attitudes about physical activity so that they can adopt healthy and physically active lifestyles. Quality physical education programs are also important because they provide learning experiences that meet youngsters' developmental needs, which in turn helps to improve their mental alertness, academic performance, and readiness and enthusiasm for learning."² Athletics, besides being one of the

Reinvent Yourself

A growing concern about the number of high school students not enrolling in our elective physical education courses at Reidsville High School led to the creation of a fitness/wellness course entitled Healthy Living. The vision was to entice at least 30 upper-class students to participate for a trial semester. To the delight of our administration, well over 100 students enrolled that inaugural year and the numbers remain consistent since the course began three years ago. Healthy Living includes a variety of fitness disciplines from yoga, Pilates, and exercise ball routines to body sculpture, stretch bands, aerobics, and dance plus cardio-work complete with heart rate monitors and core training. In addition, students design and deliver biweekly fitness/wellness sessions at local elementary schools to promote their love for healthy living and to serve as role models. Our periodic assessments continue to show inches lost, pounds shed, and body fat composition lowering. Similar courses are showing up across the state and nation as physical educators are redefining their means and methods to attract students wishing to explore new fitness interests and learn new skills and knowledge for a lifetime of healthy activity.

best dropout prevention programs ever, continues to provide excellent outlets for physical vigor, cooperation, and in most cases, both character education and sportsmanship.

Thomas Jefferson said, "A child who is not physically well cannot learn." Keeping school-age children and school districts invested in quality physical education, physical activity, and health education programs requires only one thing—accountability. Many school-level needs listed by agencies such as NCDPI require mounds of money to implement—money that districts and administrators seldom have. However, it only takes some simple steps to get and keep quality in the activity arena. Programs such as Fit 4 Learning³ have proven that daily activity, even within the classroom itself, can contribute to academic growth. Many of the state's "smartest" elementary schools (according to EOGs) require daily classroom activities, often referred to as ice breakers, brain breakers, or energizers, in addition to organized, scheduled physical education conducted by a licensed physical educator.

With this in mind, we must focus on the issue at hand—investing in physical activity. We are fortunate to have some of the best people and organizations available at our fingertips when it comes to establishing quality physical education and activity programs within our schools. Professional organizations like the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance (AAHPERD),⁴ along with our district and state associations, are an outlet for much more than new games and activities. A mountain of information can be obtained by simply visiting the AAHPERD website. There are six associations under this umbrella and interested educators, administrators, and school board members visiting the National Association of Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) link will be stunned by the amount of information in the physical domain alone. On this site, a link to the "Principals Page" will disclose such topics as suggested job interview questions for prospective physical education teachers, physical education vs. physical activity, quality physical education, physical education program checklist, and mostly importantly, national standards for physical education.

School principals who are serious about teaching the whole child would do their students justice by reading "Shape of the Nation" on the NASPE website and then requiring their HPE department to rate themselves by using the STARS Program criteria. The website also offers a monthly "Tool Box" and "Archives" full of games and activities, many of which can be modified to fit school-level needs and facilities. On the state level, North Carolina offers physical educators an abundance of material and information through NCAHPERD's yearly conventions, periodic workshops, and publications. The North Carolina Physical Education Association (NCPEA) provides an assortment of sessions at the state convention and also at workshops throughout the year. Programs at these sessions are outstanding, meet all listed standards, and provide effective suggestions for working with kids. We are fortunate in North Carolina to have such creative and dedicated physical educators. The goal should be to get this level of professionalism in all of our school activity classes. Administrators should allocate existing

Implementing North Carolina's Healthy Active Children Policy

Heather D. Pope

In today's environment of television, computers, and video games, healthful living is a skill that must be taught and a habit that must be formed early. North Carolina has recognized this need. In 2003, our State Board of Education began discussing a policy that would mandate 30 minutes of daily physical activity for school children in grades K-8. The policy, referred to as the Healthy Active Children Policy (HAC), was mandated by state law in 2005.¹ Thanks to grant monies from the Health and Wellness Trust Fund, teachers in North Carolina get free training and resources to aid in policy implementation.

As a HAC trainer I have seen many classroom teachers go from trepidation to excitement when hearing of the program and seeing the available materials. When talking to a group of middle school teachers in Wake County I was emphasizing again that our kids desperately need to get up and *move*. I was surprised and delighted when a science teacher stood up, looked at her principal, and said, "I told you so!" Despite this initial positive reaction to integrating additional physical activity into our students' school days, there are quite a few schools across the state that are noncompliant.

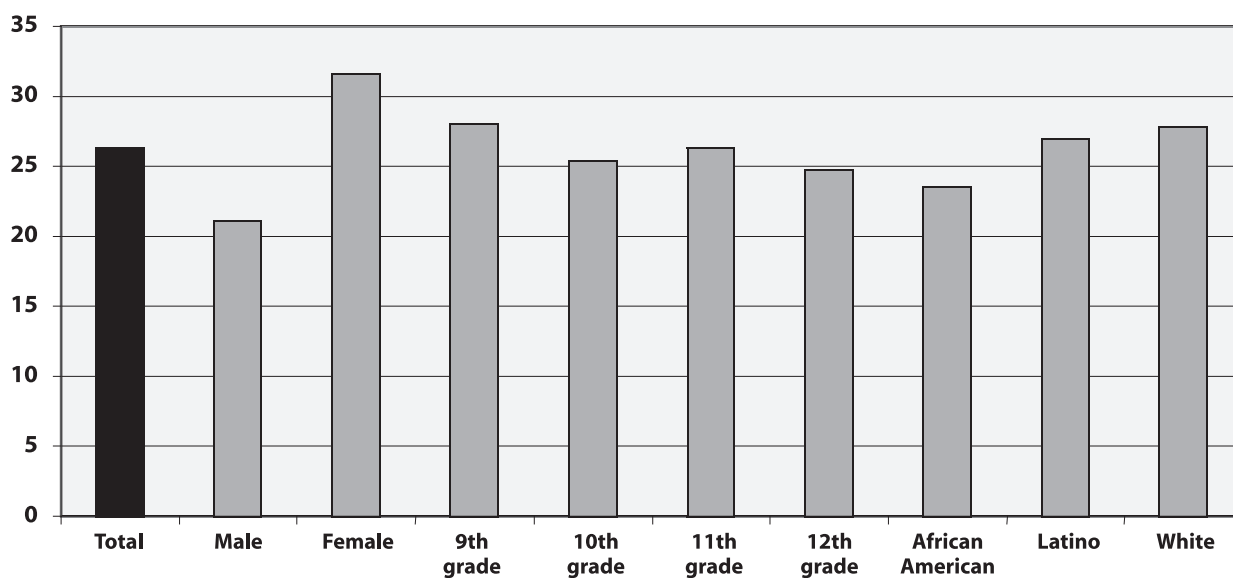
In Lenoir County, we feel that we have identified a way to aid our schools to be in full HAC compliance. Thanks to the Zone Health Program (featured on page 483) which gave us the tools we needed to evaluate all of our health, physical education, physical activity, and nutrition policies and procedures, we identified some barriers to the success of the Healthy Active Children Policy in our schools.

Educators including teachers, principals, and central office staff are all under tremendous pressure to produce test scores that demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as mandated by the educational directives of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). A majority of our energy, focus, time, and money is spent toward this endeavor. Schools and school systems who do not meet AYP can lose much-needed federal funding. Since most schools are already underfunded, it is obvious why so much effort is put toward meeting this goal.

The HAC training addresses physical activity's benefits for increased brain function and learning along with health benefits. Since the training is designed for classroom teachers, not all principals and few central office staff have attended a training session. These are

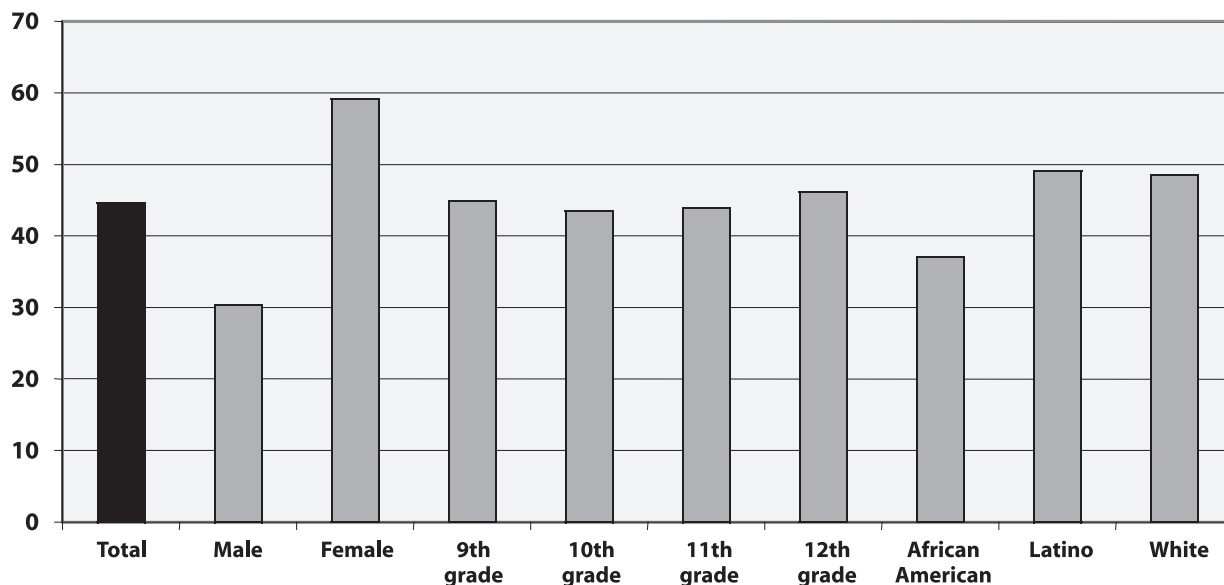
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Figure 1.
Percentage of Students Who Described Themselves as Slightly or Very Overweight, 2007^a



Source: North Carolina State Center for Health Statistics. 2007 North Carolina Youth Risk Behavior Survey.
<http://www.nchealthyschools.org/data/yrbs/>. Question 65; weighted data.

Figure 2.
Percentage of Students Who Were Trying to Lose Weight, 2007^a



Source: North Carolina State Center for Health Statistics. 2007 North Carolina Youth Risk Behavior Survey.
<http://www.nchealthyschools.org/data/yrbs/>. Question 66; weighted data.

- ^a Figure 1 indicates that only 26% of all high school students perceive themselves as slightly or very overweight. In Figure 2, results show that almost 45% of those reporting are trying to lose weight. In both figures, females lead males in the percentage of students who may be influenced by societal expectations and stereotyping. While Figure 1 does not coincide with higher state and national obesity statistics, the alarming issue is that many high school students do not view themselves as overweight or are simply accepting of their health status. Figure 2 may indicate that some students do desire weight loss but more for appearance or cosmetic reasons than for improving their health status. More opportunities for the dissemination of health and physical education information in earlier school years could help offset this cognitive position. — E. Holcomb

funds so their physical educators can take advantage of these opportunities and do follow up sessions to assure meaningful, quality activities are making their way back into lesson plans. In addition, Kymm Ballard, NCDPI consultant for physical education and athletics K-12, has worked tirelessly to align our state standards with those on the national level, thus allowing communication between administrators and physical educators to take place on a level playing field. And if money is actually a problem, both the national and state associations offer many grant opportunities.

There's a new physical education today and physical educators who have not waded into these waters are, along with their students, missing out on numerous fresh, fun methods to achieve fitness. Adventure classes, fitness classes, aerobic/dance classes, and personal training classes must be included as current student options, and teachers must be willing to reinvent themselves to keep up with the changes. The old days of sport games and weight lifting classes still have a place in the registration booklet, but the new listings are what a lot of kids are looking for today. It's not rocket science and it does not take a lot of money—just personal and administrative accountability.

In education today, the buzz words are 21st Century Learning and No Child Left Behind. 21st Century Learning is a framework of skills, knowledge, and expertise students should master to succeed in both the work place and in life. Core subjects are clearly focused in themes; however, a deeper study of the model reveals that along with standards and assessments there are life skills which fall under learning and innovation. These skills include critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and collaboration—all skills which are included daily in quality physical education classes. As physical educators we must expose our students to these skills while capturing the interests and attention of the students we teach each day. Our charge should be not only to facilitate classes based on the standards but also to inspire students with a variety of activity options that can be enjoyed for a lifetime.

In addition to that inspiration for students comes the inspiration we must provide to our colleagues through Staff Wellness Programs. In 2004, the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act was signed into law; one aspect includes the development of wellness guidelines for students and staff with goals for physical activity and other school-based activities. For educators this means structured after school programs, activity breaks during meetings, and staff icebreakers on workdays. The impact on students is through powerful role modeling—actions speak louder than words.

Since our state's HPE-EOC appears to have been abandoned, district accountability could still be promoted with the inclusion of quality physical education for all children covered by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. What we need is a No Child Left on Their Behind Act. Along with a new beginning of accountability in school-level physical activity would come the attention needed to assure attitude changes necessary to sustain the changes. Accountability or the AYP (Average Yearly Progress) can be pushed by the periodic assessments of each and every student in North Carolina. These assessments can be

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the individuals who most often make decisions about scheduling and what is expected of teachers in their classrooms. If these individuals do not understand the importance of HAC or what is required of their teachers to be in compliance with the policy, then following the policy will not be a priority. As a result, we cannot expect their teachers, schools, and school systems to make it a priority.

Our solution to the problem of HAC noncompliance is to give a short presentation to principals and central office staff highlighting how physical activity improves learning. There has been a growing body of research indicating that healthy children, fit children, children who are not overweight or obese, children who attend regular physical education classes, and children who are physically active are more successful in school and perform better on standardized tests such as those driving NCLB and AYP. We will draw on these research findings as well as the in-depth brain research Dr. John Ratey discusses in his book *Spark*² to help demonstrate to our educational leaders that physical activity is not only critical for our students' health, but for their ability to learn as well. Since student health and wellness, in addition to learning, is important to us in Lenoir County, it is our goal to ensure full HAC compliance as a result of the presentation.

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- 2 Ratey JJ, Hagerman E. *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*. New York, NY: Little, Brown, and Company; 2008.

body mass index testing, or better yet, a test that encompasses all five health related components: cardio-respiratory endurance, muscular strength, muscular endurance, flexibility, and body composition—all of which are currently found in the Physical Best Program. The President's Challenge would be another good alternative; it has been used for decades to recognize youth fitness and develop national norms for assessments. An interesting program getting a lot of attention in North Carolina at present is IsPOD (In-School Prevention of Obesity and Disease; featured on page 508). This program, coordinated and grounded by the SPARK Activity Program, is being piloted in several of our LEAs and could be adopted statewide and eventually reach the high school curriculum. Regardless of the assessment model used, it would be the AYP that provides the push.

But ongoing assessments must come with a comprehensive, coordinated K-12 program designed to meet goals and state and national standards while still attracting prevailing student interests. Assessments should follow students, be based on individual improvement, and eventually be used as physical exit tests. It only takes the leadership of the right person, whether it be a legislator, a school board member, or any sincere individual to maximize the many opportunities. And let's not forget that regardless of laws and mandates, what counts is what goes on behind the gym doors or during the class activity time; without accountability, however, it is the children who literally lose or gain.

With accountability, physical education will no longer be the scapegoat for other subjects, and a playground will no longer be for overloaded classes or a refuge for undisciplined students. State,

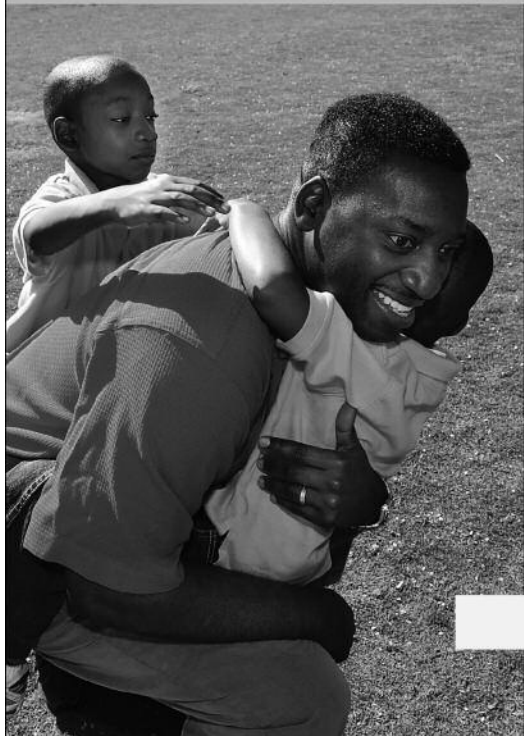
district, and local administrators would have accountability models to meet themselves, and only then will we be assured that we are all moving in the same direction, without fear of skilled school board surgeons trimming away physical activity which is necessary for lifelong health and fitness. **NCMJ**

Ernest Holcomb is the second teacher in North Carolina to ever receive both the state Physical Education and Health Education Teacher of the Year (TOY) Awards. He has also received the Southern District Physical Education Award for secondary education and was named a National Association of Sports and Physical Education Teacher of the Year (NASPE TOY) in 2006. Mr. Holcomb is currently in his 36th year of teaching and coaching. He was named both the State and National Federation of High School Sports Southern Section Baseball Coach of the Year in 2005.

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Eat Smart, Move More Health Tip



Tame the Tube— and Get Moving

Many of us say we don't have time for physical activity, yet we spend 3 to 4 hours in front of the TV. Not only are we inactive while watching television, we often snack on high-calorie foods at the same time. Trade TV time for physical activity. Walk or bike with your family after dinner. By planning TV time, you'll have more time for physical activity.

For more tips on how to tame the tube where you live, learn, earn, play and pray, visit

www.EatSmartMoveMoreNC.com

