

## Health-related Physical Education – A direction for the 21st century

**Source: Pate, R.R. & Hohn, R.C. (1994) 'Health-related Physical Education – A direction for the 21<sup>st</sup> century', pp. 215–17, in Pate, R.R. & Hohn, R.C. (Eds.) *Health and Fitness Through Physical Education*, Champaign, Illinois, Human Kinetics.**

Each of the preceding chapters was written by an author who presented his or her individual viewpoint on a particular aspect of health-related physical education. Accordingly, the careful reader will have noted that not all the authors' viewpoints are in perfect agreement; not all the procedures recommended would be perfectly compatible in the field setting. However, we believe (and we hope that the reader agrees) that several broad, cross-cutting themes are evident in the material in this book. It is our view that these themes constitute a foundation upon which to build a truly new approach to physical education.

1. *Promotion of lifelong physical activity and fitness should be the primary goal of physical education.* Perhaps the broadest and most fundamental of the themes in this book is the view that physical education should be designed with the student's future health and fitness in mind. As noted by several authors, it is clear that higher levels of physical activity *maintained through adulthood* promote health, prevent disease and enhance fitness. The challenge to physical education is to provide programs that increase the likelihood that today's students will become physically active adults.
2. *The physical education curriculum should be balanced so as to function effectively in all three educational domains.* Physical education, by virtue of both its purpose and the environment in which it occurs, is geared toward physical activity. Accordingly, it is appropriate that major emphasis be given to learning in the psychomotor domain. However, a major theme in this book is that physical education programs that focus exclusively on motor skill acquisition are too narrow and shortsighted. The authors in this book recommend repeatedly that the cognitive and affective domains should be given much more time and attention than traditionally given in physical education. So, it is recommended that physical education at once become both broader and narrower. That is, narrower in the sense that programs should focus more on promotion of lifelong activity and fitness, but broader through greater emphasis on knowledge and attitudes.
3. *Youngsters should leave their physical education experience with a heightened sense of 'physical activity competence'.* A major theme that cuts across this book is that long-term activity behavior can be effectively promoted in PE by enhancing the student's self-efficacy as it applies to activity. Youngsters who feel that they are competent in physical activities and that they are able to control their activity seem likely to exercise lifelong. Conversely, those who have had repeated failures in activity settings and who feel incompetent appear less likely to exercise regularly as adults. Accordingly, it seems important that physical education experiences be structured to provide youngsters with movement successes, not failures.

4. *Physical education should provide meaningful amounts of physical activity.* Several authors in this book decry the fact that, for a great many youngsters, physical education is a rather sedentary undertaking. Therefore, a clear recommendation is that physical education lessons be designed so as to provide youngsters with moderate to vigorous physical activity in doses that are physiologically meaningful. Although the amount of activity needed for health and fitness in childhood is not known with certainty, it seems reasonable to recommend that a youngster engage in at least 1 hr of moderate to vigorous activity per day. We cannot expect PE to meet this entire requirement, but it should make a major contribution. That it currently does not suggests that physical educators should reconsider the priorities they apply in selecting instructional methods.
5. *Physical fitness testing procedures should be designed to promote attainment of long-term activity and fitness objectives.* Different authors in this book express rather different positions on the proper role of physical fitness testing in physical fitness. However, one common theme concerning fitness testing is discernible. Fitness testing procedures, and the reward and recognition systems often used in conjunction with them, should be designed first and foremost to promote physical activity behavior. An important secondary objective is to enhance cognitive learning of health-related physical fitness. Accordingly, it is recommended that fitness tests be administered in a manner that maximizes the likelihood of the child (a) experiencing success, (b) avoiding embarrassment and failure, and (c) learning about the health-related physical fitness components. The results of fitness tests should be used in meaningful ways – ideally, by communicating the results to youngsters and their parents in an understandable fashion, and by providing effective remediation to those who are found to be in need of improvement.
6. *Physical education programs should meet the needs of all youngsters and, in particular, those who have special needs and/or are low fit.* The predominant philosophy expressed in this book calls for physical education to focus primarily on promoting active lifestyles. The underlying purpose of this orientation is to enhance the public health. Because most of the health benefits of regular exercise accrue to persons who avoid a sedentary lifestyle (i.e. they are at least moderately active), it has been argued that physical education could have its most beneficial effect on public health by attending first to the needs of those youngsters who are most likely to become sedentary adults.

Accordingly, a major theme in this book is that physical educators should strive to deal more effectively with low-fit youngsters. Because low fitness may predispose youngsters to negative exercise experiences, direct, short-term intervention to improve fitness may be appropriate. Beyond that, however, the low-fit and inactive youngster may benefit most from development of positive attitudes toward exercise and from acquisition of behavioral skills that will promote future activity. In short, low-fit kids may need us the most, and at present they probably are not getting our best service.

7. *Professional preparation programs should prepare future teachers of physical education to develop balanced curricula and to deliver instruction that is effective in all three educational domains.* No chapter in this book is dedicated to the specific issue of preparing professionals to deliver health-related physical education. However, a clear implication of the material in this book is that pedagogical programs in physical education must change if health-related physical education is to become widespread in the United States. The traditional focus of teacher training programs in PE has been on delivery of motor skill instruction. Therefore, it is not surprising that a 'good

physical education program' usually is seen as one in which the teacher effectively promotes mastery of fundamental or sport-specific motor skills.

The authors of this book as a group would agree that physical education teachers should be competent skill instructors. However, they would also agree that this is not enough. In health-related physical education, skill acquisition is an objective, not a goal. The goal is promotion of lifelong activity and fitness, and this requires physical educators to promote relevant learning in the cognitive and affective as well as the psychomotor domains. Most current professional-preparation programs fail to develop these competencies. Health-related physical education will not become a professional norm until this changes.

### **Goal clear, strategy uncertain**

This book has been dedicated to a discussion of why and how one specific component of the American educational system, physical education, could be refocused on the goal of promoting adoption of one particular health behaviour – regular participation in exercise.

Neither the process of education, nor the process of promoting health behavior change are pursuits that can be reduced to rigid guidelines and computer programs. This is so, in part, because both effective education and health promotion are somewhat intuitive, individualized processes. We do not expect this to change. However, at present, a lack of knowledge limits our ability to generate guidelines for delivery of health-related physical education. We fully anticipate that this *will* change. The pages of this book are filled with suggestions and recommendations that appear to be appropriate and useful. Few of these have been tested by research, but we hope that this, too, will change – sooner rather than later. Until such research is conducted we will remain uncertain about the most effective ways to promote lifelong physical activity through school physical education.

Although the relevant educational strategies are not yet fully developed, we submit that there is no uncertainty about the appropriateness of the major goal espoused in this book. We believe there is compelling evidence that physical education should focus its attention first and foremost on promotion of lifelong physical activity, and we think that the rationale for this position is powerfully logical. It can be summarized by the following points:

1. Lack of physical activity during adulthood is a major health problem.
2. A great many adults are physically inactive.
3. Adult physical activity behavior is determined in part by experiences during childhood.
4. School-based physical education has the capacity to provide the population of American children with experiences that can promote adoption of physically active lifestyles.

So, although we readily admit to uncertainties about optimal educational strategies, we fervently endorse the goal: The institution of physical education should, perhaps must, focus its massive energy on promotion of lifelong exercise behavior.

### **The challenge of change**

Changing physical education so that it places primary emphasis on promotion of lifelong exercise will probably be, at one level, slow and difficult. Current practice in physical education has evolved from deeply entrenched school policies and regulations, the perceptions of numerous education power brokers, and an array of professional beliefs and expectations that have developed over time. The physical

education program envisioned by the authors of this book is in fundamental ways very different from today's typical PE program. Changing the norm will require major modifications in school policies, state regulations, and professional preparation curricula. The expectations of school administrators, parents, and public agencies will have to change. Furthermore, the day-to-day practices of tens of thousands of physical educators will have to change. Clearly, the enormity of the task of markedly changing an institution as large and tradition-bound as physical education could be intimidating, akin to a supertanker making a 180° turn. We must expect that this is going to take some time.

On the other hand, at the grassroots level, change in educational practice can occur with lightning speed. In contrast with subjects such as math, science and English, physical education curricula and teaching techniques are relatively unregulated in most school districts. Professional preparation programs in physical education must meet established accreditation standards; however, these standards tend to be rather flexible. In most colleges and universities the principle of academic freedom gives individual professors the latitude to design course content and choose what types of research they will conduct.

Because the most important activity in physical education is that which *directly* impacts the students in our schools, it is possible to make changes at the most critical level on an immediate basis. If you are a teacher of physical education, you could make a change in your curriculum or teaching methodology *today*. If you are a professor in a physical education professional-preparation program, you could make a change in your course content *today*. If you are a researcher, you could begin designing a study to identify effective health-related physical education practices *today*. So, although we may be striving to turn a profession that has the inertia of a supertanker, as individuals each of us is a speed boat that can turn on a dime. The authors of this book invite you to turn...*today*.