

Comprehensive School Physical Activity Programs: Preparing leaders to implement strategies that support conditions for change

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Abstract

Leading an effective change initiative while maintaining an acceptable level of performance in all of the areas required of school leaders, requires demanding physical, cognitive, and emotional effort that can, over time, exhaust even the most dedicated leader. To ensure that personal productivity is at its highest, leaders must create organizational conditions that ensure resiliency. One strategy to create such conditions, is the adoption of a comprehensive school physical activity program (CSPAP). The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the research related to CSPAP and the description of how leaders in one school district focused on initiating the implementation. The article concludes with a discussion of implications for educational leadership preparation programs.

Introduction

Leading change is perhaps one of the most important functions of a principal, in the current environment of high stakes accountability and changing requirements. Principals are expected to improve the overall effectiveness of the school, lead teachers to meet the needs of each student, and raise the level of achievement for all students all within the context of greater and more complex challenges. Perhaps the greatest challenge is that principals must become effective change agents while performing all of their other roles. Leading an effective change initiative while maintaining an acceptable level of performance in all of the areas required of school leaders, requires demanding physical, cognitive, and emotional effort that can, over time, exhaust even the most dedicated leader. These same physical, cognitive and emotional efforts can also exhaust other stakeholders involved and/or impacted by the changes being initiated. To ensure that personal productivity is at its highest, leaders must ensure that they are creating the conditions that ensure resiliency.

Resilience is “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2012). Providing various health and wellness programs ensures opportunities for stakeholders to engage in healthy practices that promote resilience. This is critical because the complexities of any systemic school improvement initiative create a need for all stakeholders to be able to adapt and cope with the intensity of change (Patterson, Woods, Cook, & Render, 2007). “Principals must ensure organization wellness and resiliency while promoting personal productivity” to effectively lead and manage on-going change initiatives (Hooper, Bullard, & Ogletree, 2012 p. 48).

One strategy to ensure climate that promotes mental and physical well-being, is the adoption of a comprehensive school physical activity program (CSPAP). The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (the leading organization for quality physical education) also supports the campaign and aims to give teachers, principals, superintendents, school boards, and parents the support they need to help students become more physically educated and active in school (www.aahperd.org/naspe). The overall goal is to ensure that every school provides a comprehensive school physical activity program (CSPAP) with quality physical education as the foundation.

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the research related to CSPAP and the description of how leaders in one school district focused on initiating the implementation of a comprehensive approach to organizational wellness and personal productivity using the CSPAP model promoted by the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD) and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE). The article begins with an overview of the need for physical activity as a component of an overall organizational wellness approach through a review of research related to the role of wellness in achieving resiliency and productivity. Both resiliency and productivity are critical to sustaining the intense physical, cognitive, and emotional stress of change initiatives (Hooper, Bullard, & Ogletree, 2012). Following this overview, the authors introduce the model and describe the leadership actions taken in one school district to initiate a comprehensive physical activity and wellness program. The article concludes with a discussion of implications for improving the teaching and learning of educational leadership in the context of preparing school leaders to address the need to support and maintain a safe and caring climate that promotes mental and physical well-being (Hooper, Bullard, & Ogletree, 2012).

The need for physical activity

Perhaps the most critical health issue facing students in American schools today is the obesity epidemic. The number of overweight and obese children ages 6 to 11 has more than tripled over the past three decades (Hedley, Ogden, Johnson, Carroll, Curtin, & Flegal, 2004). It is predicted that children in today's schools will be the first generation expected to live a shorter lifespan than their parents (Olshansky, et al., 2005). The current and future health of our nation is clearly at risk (Heidorn & Hall, 2010). When children do not receive enough physical activity or proper nutrition, it is likely they will be absent from school more often, will have less energy, low self-esteem, and will have difficulty concentrating (Grissom, 2005). Research also demonstrates that academic performance often decreases with less physical activity (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; Grissom, 2005; Pate, Davis, Robins, Stone, McKenzie, & Young, 2006; Pelligriini & Bohn, 2005).

The role of health in resiliency and productivity

The overall value of health on one's quality of life is difficult to measure on a personal or societal level. Yet many individuals, schools, and corporations emphasize wellness as a key ingredient for success and productivity in a variety of ways. Research results encourage employers to talk with employees about the health issues that affect their well-being, productivity, and health care costs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012) since there is clear evidence that individuals with greater health risks are strongly associated with greater productivity loss (Boles, Pelletier, & Lynch, 2004). "Being physically active is one of the most important steps that Americans of all ages can take to improve their health" (www.health.gov/paguidelines).

Introduction to the model

With a Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program (CSPAP), school districts and schools utilize all opportunities for school-based physical activity. Ideally, the program aims to develop "physically educated students who participate in the nationally-recommended 60+ minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity each day, and develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to be physically active for a lifetime" (www.aahperd.org/naspe). A CSPAP is a coordinated effort to maximize knowledge and skills learned in physical education so that all students will be fully physically educated and well-equipped for a lifetime of physical activity.

Component 1: Quality Physical Education.

One of the components of a CSPAP is quality physical education, which is considered the cornerstone. Physical Education is the academic subject that provides standards-based instruction on motor and movement knowledge and skills, physical activity and fitness knowledge and skills, personal and social responsibility, and valuing physical activity for its many benefits. There is a distinct difference between physical education and physical activity. "The purpose of a

good physical education program is to educate students for a physically active lifestyle. The purpose of a good physical activity program is to provide students with their daily needs for physical activity” (Rink, Hall, & Williams, 2010, p. 16).

Quality physical education provides learning opportunities, appropriate instruction, meaningful and challenging content, and conducts student and program assessment (NASPE, 2004). A quality physical education program improves physical skills and abilities, physical fitness, readiness and enthusiasm for learning, academic performance, mental alertness, and overall student health.

Component 2: Physical Activity During School.

There are typically four major areas to consider when providing additional amounts of physical activity for students during the school day, outside of regularly scheduled physical education class. These include recess, classroom-based physical activity breaks, physical activity integrated into classroom lessons, and drop-in physical activity opportunities (www.aahperd.org/naspe). Most occasions do not take an extensive amount of time and/or preparation, but over time, can significantly increase the amount of physical activity in which a student is engaged over the course of a school day. Since many students do not receive any physical activity once they leave the school grounds, it is imperative that students are engaged in physical activity during the school day.

Component 3: Physical Activity Before and After School.

Physical activity opportunities before and after school can significantly increase the amount of physical activity in which a student engages throughout the day (Beighle & Moore, 2012). It helps meet the goal of a minimum of 60 minutes per day of physical activity. Content and skills learned in a quality physical education program can be easily implemented (and improved) in before and/or after school physical activity environments. Examples of ways many schools incorporate physical activity before and after school for all students include creating safe opportunities for students to walk and bike to school in collaboration with parents and community organizations; opening and supervising physical activity facilities for staff and student use before and after school; and organizing physical activity clubs and intramural sports to encourage physical activity participation by students of all abilities.

Component 4: Staff Involvement.

Schools benefit in many ways when a significant amount of faculty and staff members are concerned about their health and are committed to being physically active (Heidorn & Centeio, 2012). Examples of ways a school can increase faculty/staff wellness include conducting a staff needs assessment to identify health-related needs; holding walk and talk meetings with colleagues; organizing and managing a staff wellness program; continuing to provide professional development that focuses on health and wellness; providing opportunities and encouraging faculty/staff to participate in physical activity with students; providing extra

physical activity opportunities (with possible incentives) for staff; developing and teaching nutrition education; incorporating brain breaks during staff meetings; offering group fitness classes (Zumba, Pilates, dance, boot camp, Weight Watchers, etc.); and providing opportunities for blood pressure checks; CPR training, and other healthy initiatives.

Component 5: Family and Community Involvement.

Family and community involvement in school-based physical activity provides many benefits. It is clear that youth participation in physical activity is influenced by participation and support of parents and siblings. Active families often spend additional time together and experience health benefits. Families can improve their health by supporting a comprehensive school physical activity program and participating in evening/weekend special events. Being active within the community also allows maximum use of school and community resources (e.g., facilities, personnel) and creates a connection between school- and community-based physical activity opportunities (www.aahperd.org/naspe). Examples include “promoting programs and facilities where people work, learn, live, play and worship (i.e., workplace, public, private, and non-profit recreational sites) to provide easy access to safe and affordable physical activity opportunities; developing partnerships with other sectors for the purpose of linking youth with physical activities opportunities in schools and communities; and providing access to and opportunities for physical activity before and after school” (2010 National Physical Activity Plan).

Implementing the Model

The authors have been working with one school district in southwest Texas that made the commitment to fully incorporate a CSPAP in the K-12 schools. While it may be difficult to immediately and fully implement each of five components (quality physical education, physical activity during school, physical activity before and after school, staff involvement, and family and community involvement), the district is prepared to engage in efforts for continued success. District administration and experts in the fields of leadership and physical activity organized a system for effective implementation of the model. The CSPAP has support from the physical education faculty, classroom teachers, school administrators, and local community members. School administrators have already seen changes in the attitudes about physical activity and academic learning among students. The two focal points for the immediate future include quality physical education and physical activity during the school day. The district is set up beautifully for specific attention given to each of those components of the model. As the program continues to develop, concentrated efforts will follow with staff involvement, physical activity before and after school, and family and community involvement. Enriched skill development in physical education, surveys, focus groups, student and faculty physical activity logs, classroom energizers, enhanced recess, school and community activities and other ways to develop a comprehensive school physical activity program will be used to improve the overall health, physical activity habits, student participation, and academic achievement in the district.

Implications for the teaching and learning of educational leaders

Leading change has become one of the most important functions of a principal, and at the core of change is the need for school improvement and increased student achievement. Principals are expected to improve the overall effectiveness of the school, lead teachers to meet the needs of each student, and raise the level of achievement for all students all within the context of greater and more complex challenges. Perhaps the greatest challenge is that principals must become effective change agents while performing all of their other roles. The expectation today is that schools must be redesigned, not just managed (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2007); thus, leading change is a necessary, complex competency that includes creating a shared vision, promoting change through effective coalitions, nurturing the school and the people in it throughout the change process, and engaging in data-driven decision making to ensure a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. The depletion of physical, cognitive, and emotional energy inherent in change initiatives requires a proactive focus on wellness and resiliency (Schmitz, Clark, Heron, Sanson, Kuhn, et.al. 2012). The CSPAP model, promoted by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, and the PPAW initiative described in this article provide excellent examples of leadership in action as it relates to organizational wellness. Faculty in leadership preparation and development programs could create performance-based tasks that mirror the organizational assessment used to evaluate a school or districts current levels of well-being. This type of task would not only engage current and/or prospective leaders in understanding the core concepts of a CSAP, but also provide the leaders with an excellent starting point for implementing such a program in their own schools.

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