



Strategies

A Journal for Physical and Sport Educators

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ustr20>

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To cite this article: James A. Kelley & Brent Heidorn (2022) Engaging Students in Physical Activity, Skill, and Fitness Participation, *Strategies*, 35:5, 38-40, DOI: [10.1080/08924562.2022.2100160](https://doi.org/10.1080/08924562.2022.2100160)

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Published online: 14 Sep 2022.



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Engaging Students in Physical Activity, Skill, and Fitness Participation

By James A. Kelley and Brent Heidorn

As identified in the *Essential Components of Physical Education*, quality programming is focused on four key areas: (1) Policy and Environment, (2) Curriculum, (3) Appropriate Instruction, and (4) Student Assessment (SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2015). Clearly, quality physical education includes assessing student learning as one of several best practices. More specifically, effective assessment in physical education may be evidenced by a variety of strategies, as it is not a one-size-fits-all approach. The paradigm shift from using only checklists and fitness-based tests in physical education to authentic learning and assessments for learning is in full motion, at least in many programs (Chng & Lund, 2018; Moura et al., 2020). While fitness tests (e.g., FitnessGram) and other nonauthentic assessments still have a place in physical education, additional assessments that evaluate the growth of students in knowledge and skills in real-world settings need to be incorporated as well. Physical educators in quality programs identify appropriate methods for assessing student learning in all three domains (i.e., psychomotor, cognitive and affective). What seems clear is that alternative assessment in real-life, authentic environments during physical education class time is recommended (Lopez-Pastor et al., 2012; Moura et al., 2020). What is not so clear, however, or perhaps applied consistently across programs, is how students can show learning and participation in physical activity, skill, and fitness development outside of physical education class. The purpose of this column is to highlight examples for promoting and rewarding students as

they pursue physical activity, motor skills, and fitness in at-home or in community-based environments. Specifically, this column will include: (1) promoting positive and enjoyable at-home and in-the-community physical activity experiences for all students and (2) suggestions for rewarding students who participate.

Promoting Positive and Enjoyable Physical Activity Experiences for All Students

The importance of students choosing to be physically active for a lifetime is well documented. The five SHAPE America National Physical Education Standards (2014) include physical literacy as the primary emphasis, with Standard 3 specifically targeting the achievement and maintenance of a “health-enhancing level of physical activity and fitness.” Yet many physical education teachers are facing an uphill battle with the constraints of time, space and the number of students in their classes. Ensuring maximal participation during physical education classes can at times be a challenge. In addition, because many students and/or programs do not meet the national recommendations for physical education (i.e., 150 minutes/week at the elementary level; 225 minutes/week at the secondary level), promoting physical activity and fitness opportunities beyond physical education class is needed. While there is some evidence of success with an outside-of-school physical activity requirement (Heidorn, 2016), providing simple suggestions, recommendations and even



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Table 1. Sample Data Tracking Sheet

Student Name:				Grade/Class:			
Day	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat Sun	Weekly Totals
Activity: Identify the activities completed	Activity	Activity	Activity	Activity	Activity	Activity	Activity
Duration: List the time spent on the activities in 10-minute intervals	Duration	Duration	Duration	Duration	Duration	Duration	Duration
Notes: Make note of any specific thoughts or reflections from the activities	Notes	Notes	Notes	Notes	Notes	Notes	Notes

Table 2. Student Physical Activity Hours Sample in One Month

Hours	<b5>	<10b>	<15b>	<20b>	25+
Name:					

rewarding students for physical activity and fitness participation is likely an effective approach. For some students, the encouragement to participate, practice and learn additional content at home and/or in the community may be the ingredient needed for continued success.

For example, in academics, students who cannot meet academic growth often have opportunities for Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that keep them engaged in learning and provide modifications aligned to their specific needs. While we are not recommending IEPs for students struggling in physical education, it makes sense that additional promotion by teacher suggestions, recommendations and rewards could be a helpful method for students who need more physical activity. It is possible that many students will participate in positive and enjoyable learning experiences in physical activity, skill, and fitness-based pursuits. As suggested in the literature, learning experiences at home (e.g., homework) and in community organizations can increase a sense of community, self-regulatory processes, and a positive aptitude for ongoing efforts (Corno, 2020). Other research suggests that when students are actively engaged in their learning, they are more involved even when facing difficulties. On a positive note, when they are provided opportunities to be creative, it often sparks curiosity and produces feelings of success. However, when the work is repetitive or forced on students, it may lead to ritual compliance or even rebellion (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). Therefore, for the students who are struggling with positive physical activity behaviors, supporting them with various incentives, rather than requiring physical activity, may be beneficial.

Recognizing that not all students enjoy homework, additional physical activity opportunities should be positive in order to help prevent student discouragement and to further promote the continuation of lifetime physical activity. Teacher reinforcement and recognizing students who give quality efforts to this endeavor should be consistently encouraged. It is likely that when teachers provide students with numerous options for physical activity, skill, and fitness participation, and students can choose ways in which they would like to be active, the experiences will be more positive and enjoyable. For example, re-

search indicates that when students have input into activity offerings (e.g., physical education curriculum, new trends, and student-selected activities), they were more likely to participate (in physical education) and the experiences were more meaningful from the students' perspective (El-Sherif, 2014). The same is likely true for physical activity, skill, and fitness participation at home and in the community.

When students do not enjoy an activity, they may not want to continue the activity. This is likely true in academics, physical activities, or other settings. However, if students do not currently like an activity, it does not mean they cannot grow to like it or even love the activity. With this in mind, physical educators can help students learn to love to learn (and love to participate). Teachers who lead by example (e.g., describing their own physical activity experiences, new things they have learned) with their words and actions will likely help in this way. Students are also more likely to want to continue an activity or learning experience when they are being praised for their growth and participation. When students are belittled or knocked down for their failures, as may be the case in some settings, it is likely they will not want to continue in the same way or may become discouraged from learning something new. Ignoring student efforts may have a similar effect. Therefore, positive and enjoyable physical activity learning experiences are needed, and participation at home and in the community should be continually encouraged, monitored (see Tables 1 and 2), and recognized by teachers. Further, it is likely that when students are actively engaged in physical activity at home, these efforts will significantly contribute to their overall learning (i.e., authentic assessment).

Suggestions for Rewarding Students Who Participate

In some settings, if teachers are leading by example (in a variety of ways) in the school, community and beyond, they are often rewarded for their efforts of going above the normal call of duty. Teachers may receive/earn awards or other accolades, and even bonuses for significant contributions. This occurs in other professional settings as well. Perhaps the same is true for students and their participation in extracurricular physical activity opportunities. For example, many academic programs are often offered for students to join different school clubs or organizations that meet after the school day or on the weekends, and at times, students earn rewards (even college scholarships) for their participation. This same concept could be applied to physical activity, skill, and fitness. While those things may not be required (similar to extracurricular academics), they can be encouraged and monitored/tracked for student success. Physical educators could offer incentives (see Table 3) for students who join a recreational league, a school sports club, or for keeping a running/activity log, for example. Using various apps or other software is also a good possibility. These physical activity efforts have the potential to instill a love for movement that may not have happened otherwise.

Table 3. Monthly Physical Activity (PA) Reward Sample

Number of Hours Completed	Sample Reward
5 hours of PA completed	Sticker or recognition certificate
10 hours of PA completed	One music choice during class time
15 hours of PA completed	Water bottle with school logo or similar
20 hours of PA completed	Coach assistant: Help plan one activity in class
25 hours of PA completed	Lunch with teacher of choice
30 hours of PA completed	Help plan free time for one class day

Similar to implementing Positive Behavior Intervention Systems, teachers can promote positive recognition for physical activity behavior, and students can receive praise or other specific rewards for completing desired tasks. The aim of these systems is to motivate students who are not displaying the desired behaviors. This method motivates students through restorative practices rather than using punitive practices for undesired behavior. Specific to physical activity, some programs may consider offering rewards to students who show positive physical activity, skills, and fitness commitments.

As one example, a system of tracking “reward points” could be implemented, and students can redeem points in meaningful ways. This type of system could be a simple starter for motivating students to participate in physical activity and hopefully form a habit over time. While a reward-based system has the potential for student dishonesty (Heidorn, 2016), teachers may need to simply trust that the students or parents are being honest about the reported activity, if a documentation system such as this is used. The students or parents could report daily or weekly with a checklist in a folder or online using countless software programs. Various students in the program may also assist teachers with tracking the submitted reports. Table 1 is a sample data-tracking sheet that could be used online or in the program each week/month, including record-keeping of the activities, duration, and other notes. Table 2 includes a sample chart for collecting physical activity hours each month. Table 3 lists possible rewards that are no-cost or low-cost incentives for students who demonstrate positive physical activity behaviors outside of school each month.

Conclusion

Oftentimes there are gaps between the physical activity, skills, and fitness content (and time) emphasized in the schools compared to the physical activity of many students at home or in the community. Implementation of a reward system can increase motivation, helping students develop positive attitudes (and habits) toward physical activity. These habit-forming activities can lead to positive physical activity behaviors for the rest of their lives. As we know, physical education is not just a class that students take to complete a requirement or earn a grade. We have a responsibility to help instill positive behaviors that carry over into adulthood. Promoting meaningful physical activities, allowing for student choice and voice, and offering some level of incentives for physical activity participation may be the ingredients needed for student continuation (even extending physical education beyond the school day) for a lifetime.

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Submissions Welcome!

Readers are encouraged to send “Theory into Practice” submissions to column editor Anthony Parish at aparish@georgiasouthern.edu.

The purpose of the Strategies Theory into Practice column is to distill high-quality research into understandable and succinct information and to identify key resources to help teachers and coaches improve professional practice and provide high-quality programs. Each column (1,000 –1,300 words or roughly four typed, double-spaced pages) summarizes research findings about a timely topic of interest to the readership to enable practitioners to apply research, knowledge and evidence-based practice in physical education and sports.

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