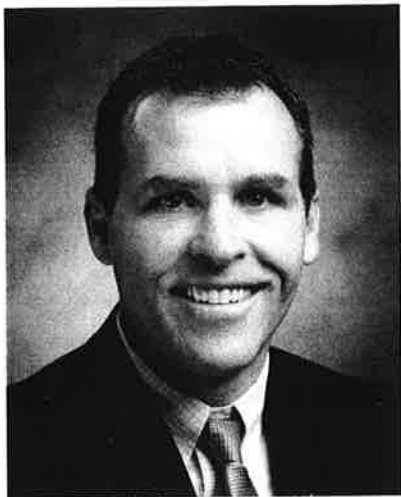


# Physical Activity and Physical Education: A Combined Approach

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For the past several years various debates have been taking place at professional conferences, through professional journal publications, on university campuses, and in gymnasiums throughout the United States related to whether physical education should focus on promoting physical activity during class or place most of its emphasis on teaching skills. Physical education teacher educators, researchers, physical educators, and physical activity enthusiasts have joined in on these discussions. While many believe in the importance of both physical activity and teaching skills through quality physical education, some have argued that we must choose sides on this debate — that it is either one or the other. This issue trickles down to curricula and content decisions made at every level of physical education and impacts experienced K–12 school physical education teachers, professors

in higher education programs, beginning teachers, and the students in K–12 programs alike.

Most physical educators support the concept that the purpose of physical education is to promote physical activity for a lifetime. While we agree that we want children to become physically active for a lifetime, we often struggle to agree on the best way to accomplish this goal. Thus a large and sometimes divisive rift has opened in the fields of physical education and physical activity. Perhaps the rift is good, forcing us to think deeply about the reasons why many individuals choose not to be physically active. On the one hand, individuals claim the only way to accomplish this goal (physical activity for a lifetime) is for physical education to “double down” on its efforts to teach skills. The other side is just as convinced that providing more opportunities to be physically

active during physical education is the only way to produce students who are physically active for a lifetime. What is implicit in these arguments is that teachers must choose — meaning they cannot teach students skills *and* get students physically active at the same time.

In this brief article we offer a third viewpoint. This viewpoint is that both sides are correct. We believe that students must be provided opportunities to be active in class if they are going to become physically active for a lifetime. Further, we believe that physical education must provide students with the requisite skills to be physically active, if it is to meet the long-term goal of physical activity for a lifetime. Finally, we believe that the only way to provide students these skills is for them to practice the skills while being physically active. Thus teaching students skills in physical education and providing them with

opportunities to be physically active are not opposing viewpoints. Rather, they are two sides of the same coin.

Students cannot become skillful by simply listening to a physical education teacher describe the skills and watching demonstrations, no matter how well presented the skill cues are or authentic the demonstrations. To obtain skills students must practice them. The only way to practice those skills is to engage in physical activity. Similarly, students may not pursue a lifetime of physical activity if they do not master many of the skills learned through a quality physical education program. Ideally, a quality physical education program teaches students the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to be physically active for a lifetime.

### Skill Development and Practice Time Are Essential

To effectively learn a motor skill, research suggests five basic requirements (Rink, 2014). These include prerequisites, a clear idea of the task, the motivational/attentional disposition to the skill, practice and feedback. Because many of the skills taught in K–12 physical education programs are new to the students, some teachers provide instruction while students observe or stand waiting for their turn, which results in a reduction of maximal practice time. Unfortunately, this poor teaching practice limits the amount of physical activity students get in the allotted time of a physical education class. For that reason, research encourages teachers to “provide maximal activity or practice time for all students at an appropriate level of ability” (Rink, 2014, p. 10). Teachers should focus on the direct relationship between opportunities to learn and learning by providing maximal practice time. On a related note, having students participate in physical activity without appropriate instruction may produce physically active students during the physical education classes but,

unfortunately, will not provide the skills needed to effectively pursue a lifetime of physical activity outside of school.

### Physical Activity Is a Crucial Part of Teaching Skills in Physical Education

It is also critically important for physical education to provide students with the skills they need to be physically active for a lifetime during physical education. It is impossible to do this without providing quality physical activity experiences during physical education. One of the four criteria of a quality learning experience is that “the learning experience must provide maximal activity or practice time for all students at an appropriate level of ability” (Rink, 2014, p. 42). Therefore, quality learning experiences are inherently active because they provide students with maximal time to practice the skills they are learning. If learning experiences are not active, then students are not learning the skills necessary to be active for a lifetime.

Further, research has shown that children who are active when they are young are more likely to continue to be active as adults (Malina, 2001). Therefore, physical education can be one of the many settings throughout the school day that provides students with activity experiences. Providing physical activity opportunities during physical education is also especially important as schools continue to scale back the time students spend in physical education and other physical activity opportunities (i.e., recess) because of the current climate of high-stakes testing (Lee, Burgeson, Fulton, & Spain, 2007). As time for physical education and recess dwindles in schools, it is essential to provide students with the most activity possible in the few times left for them to be physically active during the school day.

### Conclusion

The role of physical education is to provide students with the skills,

knowledge and attitudes to be active for a lifetime (Pangrazi & Beighle, 2016). Fortunately, the field is beginning to be galvanized under this focus. With this unity come discussions on how best to promote physical activity through physical education experiences. As we have argued, promoting physical activity by maximizing activity during physical education goes hand-in-hand with teaching skills. That is, to teach students the requisite skills for lifelong physical activity during physical education, the students must be engaged in physical activity during physical education lessons. As physical education continues to embrace its role in physical activity promotion, it is our hope that programs begin to look for additional strategies to effectively provide students with the skills, knowledge and attitudes to be active throughout life.

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