Bryan McCullick/Paul Schempp/Greg Schuknecht

The Status of Physical Education in the United States

The structure and status of physical education (PE) in the United States has changed significantly over the past 40 years. Physical education has gone from being an important and valued component of children's education in the 1950s and 1960s to being unimportant and threatened with elimination in the 1970s and 1980s to once again achieving a level of status in the 1990s. In the 1950s and 1960s, America felt a need to be physically prepared for military action. The USA was involved in wars in Korea and Vietnam, and the threat of attack from the USSR made military preparedness a priority. With the decline and fall of the USSR, and an anti-military sentiment in the USA, the need for physical fitness was seen to wane in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1990s, however, brought increased attention to health related problems that were attributed to a lack of exercise and physical activity. With this increasing recognition for sport and physical activity, physical education is once again gaining status in public schools.

As in Germany, the worth of physical education in the USA is regularly examined by local school districts who make decisions regarding budgets and finance. Educational leaders, scholars, teachers, administrators and parents have called for a greater concentration on core academic subjects and less emphasis on physical education (Kean 1990; Stier/Milchrist/Kleinman 1994). On more than one occasion, physical education programs have been the first to be eliminated due to financial considerations. Physical education teachers in some school districts have to constantly justify physical education's place in the school curriculum (Scantling/Lackey/Strand/Johnson 1998). There is, however, some evidence to suggest that physical education is becoming more respected in the latter part of the 20th and early 21st centuries. The purpose of this article is to inform German physical educators and scholars as to the current status of physical education in the USA and its justification and main tasks in public schools.

Status of Physical Education in the United States

The status of physical education in the United States, even with an increased awareness of the need for healthy activity, is tenuous at best. On the negative side, students in many states and school districts are not exposed to physical education as much as it is recommended by national health objectives. Only the state of Illinois requires daily physical education for all students in grades K-12 (AAHPERD 1993) and while almost all states require that physical education be offered, a large percentage allow students to elect not to take it (Pate/Leavy-Small/Ross/Young/Flint/Warren 1995). Additionally, the physical education curriculum is somewhat limited to major team sports rather than lifetime fitness activities (Pate/Leavy-Small/Ross/Young/Flint/Warren 1995) thus making it difficult to cultivate a love for movement and activity in all students.

Another roadblock to physical education achieving positive status in the United States schools is teacher-coach role conflict (Templin/Anthrop 1981). In the USA, physical education is closely linked with sport, especially at the secondary level. In many cases physical education teachers are also asked to coach after-school sport teams as a part of their teaching duties. Many times the teacher/coaches' job performance is measured in the sport winning percentage and not in effective school teaching. This, in turn, causes those teachers faced with this dilemma to concentrate more on planning sport practices and game strategy rather than preparing and teaching their physical education classes. This creates an environment in which physical education is of secondary or tertiary importance in the school hierarchy.

Somewhat related to the low status of physical education is the current teacher shortage in the USA and the movement toward reducing the number of students in each class (Turley/Nakai 1998). Experts predict that in the next five years the need for teachers will nearly double, therefore requiring teachers to teach out of their subject area. A result of this phenomenon is the fact that in order for schools to fill positions many teachers are being hired to teach subjects for which they are not certified. As this happens, the implications for physical education are great. It will mean that fewer qualified individuals will be charged with teaching physical education. Damage to the credibility of the field may occur and it is quite likely that teaching effectiveness in physical education will be sacrificed by filling teaching positions will ill-prepared teachers. Student gains in skill and fitness development will likely suffer as well. Additionally, on occasion schools will hire the coach to teach out of his/her main subject area in order to fill a coaching position. This means that a coach who is not certified to teach in a subject may be hired to teach that subject.

Recently, three positive events have occurred that have brought physical education to the forefront and concern of the citizenry and school administrators and have helped to elevate the status of physical education somewhat (DeMarco/McCullick 2000):

a) the development and promotion of standards and benchmarks for physical education by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education,
b) the findings of the 1996 Surgeon General's report, and
c) the proposal of the Physical Education for Progress Act of 1999 by United States Senator Ted Stevens.

With these developments it seems that the time is now for physical education to become a greater concern to school policy makers. However, whether these developments will increase the status of physical education is yet to be determined.

For a subject matter to have credibility in the USA, it is important for it to have standards and benchmarks for students to achieve before graduating from high school.

It is believed that if a subject matter has goals, a direction and framework is in place for instruction. Until 1995, physical education lacked a common direction and no set goals. The development of the benchmarks provided the field with a justification and demonstrated to those outside of physical education that the subject merits a place in the school curriculum. These benchmarks call for students to be proficient in a many physical activities, value a physically active lifestyle, and know how to establish and develop a personal physical activity program (NASPE 1995).

In 1996, the United States Surgeon General published a report on Physical Activity and Health (CDC 1996). The findings indicated:

a) more than 60% of American adults do not achieve the recommended amount of physical activity,
b) almost 50% of young adults are not vigorously active on a regular basis,
c) enrollment in high school daily physical education classes dropped 17%, and
d) only 19% of high school students enrolled in daily physical education are physically active for 20 minutes or more.

The widely-publicized report also specified ways to help make improvements in fitness levels for adults and children. One of the major recommendations was to increase the number of physical education classes and promote activity in schools.

Recently, a proposal by lawmakers that would encourage state and local governments and local educational agencies to provide high quality daily physical education programs for all children in kindergarten through grade 12 has made the public become more aware of the need for physical education in the curriculum. The rationale for this a piece of legislation based on the belief that:

a) physical education programs provide children the opportunity to develop motor competence, a sense of capability to engage in lifelong physical activities of personal choice, and physical fitness,
b) physical education programs are integral in the affective development of children,
c) physical education programs are essential to address cognitive development of children.

The Bill is currently being considered by the United States Senate. However, at this time, the passage of this law is still in question.

Justification, Main Tasks, Current Trends

The justification and main tasks of physical education in the United States are numerous. Although organizations such as the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD) and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) advocate and publish standards for school physical education, the determination of what is important is usually undertaken by state governments, local school districts, and physical education teachers. At the local level, what is deemed important usually depends on the teacher's curricular orientation. Curricular orientations are strongly influenced by the school experiences of the teachers and during formal teacher training (Templin/Schempp 1989) . The main tasks for physical education in the United States are generally classified into four categories:

a) fitness/Wellness development,
b) skill development,
c) affective development, and
d) cognitive development (Jewett/Bain/Ennis 1995).

Traditionally the core of physical education programs, fitness and Wellness has recently become a refocus for many programs. The shift to concentrating on fitness development has come about due to the United States Surgeon General's report on the health of America's children. According to the report, American children are more obese and physically unfit than ever before. Researchers at San Diego State University have recently developed an innovative program called SPARK (McKenzie/Sallis/Faucette/Kolody 1997) designed to encourage more fitness-related activities in physical education classes and thus increase fitness levels. The program offers physical education teachers and classroom teachers activities and information to teach fitness effectively to children. Due to the nature of physical education in the USA, many elementary school aged children only receive 60 minutes of structured PE time per week. Thus, another objective of the SPARK program is to make the most of the time spent in physical education.

A majority of physical education programs view the development of motor and sport skills as the justification for physical education in the school curriculum. Jewett/Bain/Ennis (1995) termed teachers who believe this as having a „Disciplinary Mastery“ orientation. Programs that are focused on these main tasks provide a curriculum for their students that include learning locomotor, manipulative, and non-manipulative skills that can be used in a multitude of team and individual activities. George Graham has been a leader in this curricular approach (Graham/Holt/Hale/Parker 1998)

The affective development of children through activity is yet another main task of physical education programs in the United States. Led by Don Hellison (1995), a move to cultivate affective behaviors in children is gaining momentum. In the United States, the number of children who live in poverty, belong to gangs, and who do not receive full social benefits is skyrocketing. To address this growing social problem, physical education programs have focused on achieving outcomes such as:

a) respect for the rights and feelings of others,
b) participation and effort,
c) self-direction,
d) sensitivity and responsiveness to the well-being of others, and
e) using these behaviors outside of the physical education classroom (Hellison 1996).

It seems that this movement will gather more support as we move into the next century. In the past three years there have been an alarming number of school violence incidents. Shootings, fights, and other acts of violence have become all too common in contemporary American schools. Some people attributed the explosion of violence in schools to the lack of preparation in the affective domain. A curricular emphasis in social skills and the use of Hellison's (1995) model represent viable program changes for physical education in the United States.

The ability of sports and physical activity to develop cognitive skills is another justification for physical education. Outcomes such as learning strategies, rules, anatomy, physiology, health, and critical thinking are the main tasks for programs with a cognitive justification. For example, many secondary schools are expanding their physical education curriculum to include training in physical education related careers such as athletic training. In a 1995 issue of the *Journal of Physical Education Recreation and Dance* (the leading journal for practicitioners of physical education), scholars advocated the development of critical thinking skills as a main task of physical education. Previously critical thinking was not considered a main task of physical education. Ron McBride (1995), however, contends that physical education is an area where critical thinking can be used best due to the fact that physical, cognitive, and affective challenges are a part of every class on a daily basis.

Conclusion

To say that the status of physical education in the United States is either positive or negative would be both inaccurate and unfair. What can be said is that physical education is facing a time when its status can take a turn for the good or the bad. It is evident that public concern for children's physical and mental health is great and the current climate has given physical education a chance to again become a significant aspect of the school curriculum. However, if the profession does not capitalize on this national concern and does not highlight its inherent benefits to the people of the United States, the future of physical education in the United States once again be in trouble.

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Bryan McCullick, Ph. D.
Paul Schempp, Ed. D.
Greg Schuknecht
University of Georgia
Department of Physical Education and Sport Studies
Ramsey Center, 300 River Road
Athens, GA 30602, USA
eMail: bamccull@arches.uga.edu

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Norbert Gissel (Hrsg.)

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