

High-Stakes Testing and the Status of Physical Education

What Was the Question?

Principals must continually assess and prioritize the needs of their schools with regard to the curriculum offered, instruction time allocated to different subjects, resources allocated, and student outcomes. In this age of high-stakes testing, principals are under enormous pressure and are ultimately held accountable for their school's performance. As momentum continues to build for students to perform well on standardized tests, the value of physical education and other related arts will be questioned. Because these subjects are typically not part of a student's academic achievement profile, they are becoming marginalized and a victim of a curriculum reduction. What principals often overlook are the positive contributions that quality physical education and related arts programs make towards a child's overall development, and how this affects their academic achievement. Stevens-Smith, Fisk, Keels-Williams, and Barton (2006) sought to determine where physical education fell in the priorities of elementary school principals.

What Was Done?

Eighty-six elementary and primary school principals representing 25 school districts containing 213 schools, distributed across a socioeconomic range based on students' eligibility for free or reduced-price lunches, completed a 30-question survey that assessed their perceptions of the academic value of the following subjects: language arts, math, science, social studies, history, physical education, art, music, technology, foreign language, and health. Data were also collected on how curricular areas were prioritized with regard to their importance and time allocation.

What Was Found?

Sixty-four percent of the principals ranked physical education last out of all academic subjects identified, and 31 percent did not view it as an academic area. One of the reasons that principals gave for the low rankings was that physical education is not vital to the school's functioning. Principals saw physical education as a place to go and be active, but not as a subject that enhances academic learning. Not surprisingly, time allotment followed perceptions of academic viability, with physical education being given 84 minutes per week compared to 523 for language arts, 335 for math, 186 for science, 171 for social studies, 154 for history, 97 for health, 90 for foreign language, and 87 for technology. Only music (64) and art (59) were allocated less time. Furthermore, while 96 percent of the principals indicated that they were aware of standards of learning for physical education, only 61 percent indicated they felt accountable for these. Thirty-nine percent said they were not accountable for physical education standards. This was in contrast to 95 percent of principals who indicated accountability for language arts and math, and 91 percent for science.

What Does the Study Mean?

In an era driven by standards and testing, principals are under enormous pressure to show proof of their school's ability "to meet standards" and to perform at a level of academic achievement deemed acceptable by those in policymaking positions. When schools perform poorly, principals look for ways to help their students to improve by instituting curricular programs designed to enhance their performance. As principals schedule time for such implementation, in

many cases, physical education time is reduced.

Data revealed that principals view physical education as having lower academic value and as a subject area in which students do activity that is not critical to the mission of their school (e.g., 21 of the 86 principals ranked physical education a low-priority course and none as a high priority). If the place of physical education in the overall school curriculum is to be enhanced, then it seems that the program worth must be established through a quality curriculum that incorporates national standards to assess student and school performance. As noted by the *Shape of the Nation Report* (NASPE, 2001), "... content that is not tested becomes lower in priority" (p. 3). The subjects for which teachers and principals are not held accountable will continue to be relegated to a lower priority. Physical educators need to advocate for legislation that addresses accountability if the status of the subject as a viable curricular area is to improve.

References

- National Association for Sport and Physical Education. (2001). *Shape of the nation report: Status of physical education in the USA*. Reston, VA: Author.
- Stevens-Smith, D., Fisk, W., Keels-Williams, F., & Barton, G. (2006). Principals' perceptions of academic importance and accountability in physical education, *International Journal of Learning*, 13(2), 7-20.

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