



# The *new* P.E.



Preparing students to make healthy decisions about physical activity, health, and nutrition is the hallmark of quality P.E. programs.

**By Joan Vandertie, Amy B. Corner, and Kevin J. Corner**

Janelle never liked P.E. much. She was overweight, had a hard time moving, and was extremely self-conscious. Janelle's goal in P.E. was to stay under the radar, not get noticed, and put in the minimum effort necessary to pass and get out. In elementary school, dressing for class and showing up had been sufficient to accomplish this goal.

But, Marana Middle School in Tucson, Ariz., was different. Marana's P.E. teachers wanted students to do more than just show up. They wanted Janelle to move, run, choose activities, and then participate fully in the choices she made.

At first, Janelle resisted. She was surprised to learn that swimming was not just sitting by the pool. During running, she thought she could just not try and accept a low grade. But teachers challenged her in positive ways, encouraging her to strive for her personal best. Finally, she had a breakthrough. With her teacher by her side, Janelle ran before school because she was too embarrassed to run in front of classmates. Her teacher refused to accept her usual lack of effort, encouraging her with each step and each breath to keep moving. Janelle finished her run not just within the required time but two minutes under the minimum accepted time. She saw that she was capable of more and began giving greater effort toward her physical fitness both in and out of class. Her hard work paid off in more energy, confidence, and vitality. She signed up to take P.E. again the next semester as an elective. Three years later, Janelle's mom still speaks of this program's effect on her daughter as they continue to exercise regularly together. "She's doing really great now," says Janelle's mother. "We are working out together." Janelle did lose weight, but more importantly, she gained confidence and committed to exercising for the long term.

Janelle's success is neither unique nor the result of chance. Instead, it is the intentional outcome of a program at Marana that is built around supporting the healthy decision making of all students.

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**Healthy decision making is a skill, just like learning to swim or clearing a hurdle.**

This massive shift and programmatic change occurred in an ordinary middle school with a very traditional sports-based P.E. program, and it influenced changes in the broader community. Marana's 7th and 8th graders are staying active and helping the community by walking dogs at the animal shelter, doing yard work at retirement homes, painting homes for the elderly, cleaning up the local community, and participating in various fund-raising walks and runs for causes meaningful to them. These students are influencing the healthy decision making of others by combining their knowledge of physical fitness with their commitment to community service.

Changes at the 1,000-student school in the Marana Unified School District are part of a national effort to transform physical education classes from courses designed for jocks into courses intended to encourage physical activity for all participants. The national standards from National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) reflect the change in direction that quality physical education programs should take. These standards emphasize lifetime fitness and activity, and students are expected to "participate regularly in physical activity" (Standard 3) and to "achieve and maintain a health-enhancing level of physical fitness" (Standard 4). The standards go so far as to task P.E. programs with graduating students who "value physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression, and/or social interaction" (Standard 6). Furthermore, students are expected to "exhibit responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others in physical activity settings" (Standard 5).

Marana's changes were sparked by conversations between Tucson high school science teacher Amy Corner and middle school principal Allison Murphy, who met regularly for fitness walks. Their concerns

about the lack of fitness among their students and local residents eventually led to more formal discussions and meetings. Could school P.E. classes ever be more than just a place for "athletes"?

By the beginning of the 2008-09 school year, Marana had decided to scrap its traditional P.E. program that emphasized team sports and shift to a program that focuses on lifetime fitness, student choice in activities, and nutrition and health education. The program also includes student leadership development and informal community service.

With funding from a \$647,000 Carol M. White Physical Education Grant, Marana was able to buy all of the necessary equipment to make its dream a reality. "This gave us tremendous financial freedom to buy the equipment. However, equipment is just equipment without the program and the right staff to implement that program to turn state-of-the-art equipment into a state-of-the-art program," said Corner, project director of the Carol M. White grant.

### *A new vision*

Schools need to deliver P.E. programs that arm kids with the knowledge and skills to make healthy choices long after they leave P.E. class. Healthy decision making is a skill just like learning to swim or clearing a hurdle, which means that students need intentional instruction to develop that skill. Being an athlete does not inherently mean that students have developed lifelong healthy behaviors. Improvement depends on going back and assessing progress after participation, critiquing decisions, and analyzing performance goals so students become even more successful and responsible for improving their healthy decision-making skills. Marana teachers built that reflection into the P.E. curriculum.

With sports, students just play. They often aren't





asked to consider how they worked in teams, what it means to work well in a team and where that might affect them in their lives outside P.E. and sports.

Activities involve smaller groups of students to provide more participation by all. Student choice drives involvement. Teachers collaborate to offer multiple options to students, enabling them to be involved in activities they enjoy rather than being required to participate in the single activity chosen by the teacher. Units rotate every week or two.

The activities emphasize lifetime activity and, upon completion, students reflect on what they enjoyed, what they would likely continue to do, what obstacles they might find to regular participation, and what they could do to overcome those obstacles. When the goal changes from simple participation to healthy decision making, the teachers feel it is important to take time to reflect on the effectiveness of decisions made and consider a plan for the future. Reflecting gives students an opportunity to connect to past experience and then move those decisions forward and try their new plan with a new unit, essentially giving them several new beginnings during the semester.

### *Measuring student progress*

Each week, students choose from a variety of activities, including using the cardio room, using the weight room, climbing wall, basketball, dodgeball, football, circuits, swimming, floor hockey, walking, and inline skating or Rollerblading.

Monday through Thursday, students spend an hour a day with the teacher who facilitates the activity they chose. Students begin each class by dressing and returning to the gym where they sit in warm-up lines. Students learn the four-minute warm-up routine from a teacher but, for the rest of the se-

mester, students run the activity. This promotes student leadership, communication, and teamwork. After the warm-up, students separate into their chosen activities, such as strength training, various team sports, cardio, or personal fitness.

### **Moving into the Future: National Standards for Physical Education**

Physical activity is critical to developing and maintaining good health. The goal of physical education is to develop physically educated individuals who have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to enjoy a lifetime of healthful physical activity.

A physically educated person:

- Demonstrates competency in motor skills and movement patterns needed to perform a variety of physical activities;
- Demonstrates understanding of movement concepts, principles, strategies, and tactics as they apply to the learning and performance of physical activities;
- Participates regularly in physical activity;
- Achieves and maintains a health-enhancing level of physical fitness;
- Exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others in physical activity settings; and
- Values physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression, and/or social interaction.

**Source:** National Association for Sport and Physical Education, [www.aahperd.org/naspe/standards/nationalStandards/PEstandards.cfm](http://www.aahperd.org/naspe/standards/nationalStandards/PEstandards.cfm)

Friday is a “no dress” day because there are no activities. Using a rubric, students assess themselves each week on attendance, preparedness, effort, respect, and listening to and following directions.



They circle where they fall on a continuum and then provide evidence for why they deserved that ranking. Teachers add comments to student rubrics as students are filling them out. Weekly grades come from these rubrics

Students track their activity by using four-week Physical Activity Logs. During the first week, they record baseline physical activity data. For the next three weeks, their goal is to have 60 minutes of activity on at least five days each week. In addition, students can act as supervisors by convincing a family member or friend to share the same level of activity for two weeks. This allows students to actually practice becoming the influencers their teachers expect them to become.

### Changing your school's P.E. program

The Marana Middle School staff believes changes in P.E. programs are possible in all types of schools.

- Begin with the end in mind. Create a goal and keep it in mind as you begin to make decisions.
- Consider some of the simple changes you can make. For example, circuits can be done with very little equipment and can introduce students to a variety of activities in a fun way. Marana rotates students in groups every two minutes or so, with music pumping, to a variety of stations that can be designed with very little money/equipment.
- Being more mindful in your teaching doesn't cost anything. Bring your team of P.E. teachers together and offer students choices rather than separating the kids into classes by teacher. Teachers are able to teach something they're excited about, and the kids appreciate being able to choose the activity that's right for them.
- Visit schools that have changed their P.E. programs, but plan to tailor your changes to what works in your school and your community. Invite students to attend the visits with you so you get their perspective.

Students devote class time to reflecting on the activity they logged, why certain weeks had more or less and what obstacles they may have encountered that prevented them from reaching their 60-minute goal five times a week. In addition, kids analyze their success in finding an activity buddy. What techniques were more successful in encouraging others to participate? What obstacles got in the way?

Students take a cardiovascular test of their choice — a one-mile run or a Progressive Aerobic Cardiovascular Endurance Run (PACER) — that helps the teachers determine whether they fall within a healthy fitness zone. Students set a goal and learn how to use that to improve their cardiovascular fitness. At the end of the unit, students reflect on the success of their goal setting and where else this skill could benefit them. This particular unit runs over the course of about eight weeks spanning two quarters. The test

and results are recorded three times during the assignment at the beginning, middle, and end of the time period. This allows students to see if they are improving as a result of their plan.

### Measuring program success

One indicator of the program success is that students are choosing to take P.E. again for another semester. One semester of P.E. is required but students can sign up for more semesters if room is available. "I used to hate P.E. It was so boring, and we never did anything, but now we get to choose so we do the stuff we like," said one student.

Students have been taking an honest look at their fitness levels and have begun doing something about it. "I can't wait to use the cardio room. I need to lose some weight!" "I only used to be able to run for about two minutes; now I can actually run a mile!"

Parents report that their kids love the new program. "I can't believe it! My son comes home and asks for snacks that are more nutritious," said one mother.

"I don't have to beg my daughter and her friends to get off the phone and go out and play anymore. They seem to like being more active," said another.

"I am a little upset with the program because now my daughter is calling me out when I don't get my walk in each day. Just kidding . . . now, we're actually walking together," said another parent.

Because of the new P.E. program, Marana students have become more active. Some days, 40 or more kids participate in lunchtime intramural programs. Participation in after-school P.E. offerings has also increased. "I just like participating. It's fun, and it makes me feel better," said one student.

"Before, I would just hang around with my friends, but now we all shoot hoops at lunchtime," said another student.

"I never knew I would be any good at Rollerblading, but after trying it in PE, I like doing it after school, too," said one student.

### Changing teacher work

Teachers said their common planning and time for conversation has led to a greater understanding of the curriculum and more consistency among teachers.

Marana teachers meet weekly to discuss issues that have arisen and problem-solve solutions because this program is committed to continuous improvement. Teachers facilitate activities and reflection. They encourage students to treat each other well and remind them what that looks like. They see behaviors that are not OK and reflect with students involved as to how they could have chosen differently. In turn, they take the time to reflect on the effectiveness of

their own behaviors so that they can be better role models and facilitators for the kids. They reflect as a group as well as individually. Teachers can be heard discussing how they could have better handled a situation, keeping within the common department goals.

Because student assessment has changed, teachers said they do more record keeping. "There is more work, no doubt about it. You simply cannot make the changes we are trying to make without it," said one teacher.

Instead of just looking across their grade books to check for absences and nondress outs, teachers read and comment on student rubrics. Weekly, the rubrics are fairly easy because teachers make comments during class as students are filling them out. On unit rubrics, teachers make comments after students had filled these in. This obviously takes more time than what they were doing before, but teachers believe the extra time will translate into learning that students will take away from class.

"It does not take more time for us to set up activities, but it does take more time to reflect on what we want them to get from our activities and the mindful dialogue that needs to take place prior to, during, and after these activities," said one teacher.

Teachers said the new program "has a positive structured curriculum aligned with the state standards."

Teachers also said they're paying more attention to their personal nutrition and fitness.

### *Falcons R Fit 4 A Cause*

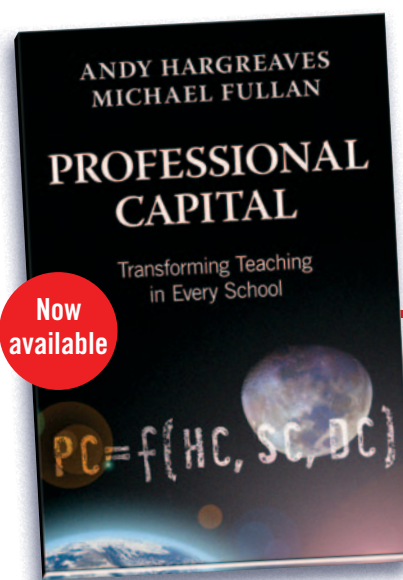
One of the most exciting new aspects of the curriculum is the Falcons R Fit 4 A Cause program. Sometime during the semester, the kids are asked to get involved in their community in some way that requires them to simultaneously be physically active. This can be an officially sanctioned event like a community run/walk for a cause or an informal activity to help in the community. Upon completion, students bring an artifact that shows proof of completion for the Falcons R Fit 4 A Cause community service display. Artifacts might range from event t-shirts to pictures of themselves and friends participating in an event flyer. Students participated in diabetes and breast cancer walks as well as in activities to raise money for Charlie's Angels (a program that provides help for families who need it during the holidays). Kids walked dogs for a local shelter and helped clean up at a nursing home facility.

Students are also organizing their own

Falcons R Fit 4 A Cause events. When challenged by her students to prove that she could "walk the talk," grant director Amy Corner told students that she would fill up a bag with trash while she was out walking. Imagine the delight when the pictures of Mrs. Corner with her bag of trash went up on the display. Kids are encouraging and including friends who aren't in P.E. to join in as well as challenging the adults in their lives to participate.

### *In conclusion*

As a result of their new program, teachers imagine their students being adults who find regular ways to fit activity into their lives and try to make healthy decisions most of the time. They hope their students will become the parents who go outside to practice soccer with their kids, ride bikes, or hike with their family. They will be modeling staying fit and eating a healthy diet. Fast food in their homes will more likely be a lowfat, six-inch sandwich with a salad rather than the biggest burger on the menu. Their kids will be the adult voters who will consider a candidate's spending record on such things as walking/biking paths, parks, and playgrounds. They will also be the community leaders participating in fun walks, marathons, and bike rides that support important causes as a way to connect with their neighbors and stay fit at the same time. **K**



**Andy Hargreaves  
& Michael Fullan**

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