Pedagogy

Chapter 12

A Brief Look At Iowa's K-12 Physical Education Content Standards

By
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The marriage of physical and mental development in American education has endured since the beginning of our Western culture. The ancient maxim *mens sana in corpore sano* clearly defines the ideal. Many of Iowa's early leaders in physical education recognized, acknowledged, and promoted the mind/body connection. For example, Davenport, Iowa's Elementary School Course of Study in Physical Culture (1911) begins with a quote by Francis W. Parker:

> *It may never be known scientifically what a tremendous influence the body and all its organs exert upon the brain, and consequently upon the intellect. The more I see of physical training in schools, the more I believe in it; the more I study psychology, especially physiological psychology, the stronger my belief becomes in physical training. (p.3)*

As caretakers of the motor domain, today's physical educators play a crucial role in the mental development of our youth. The linguistic high ground of education is rich with connections to the physical nature of life. Education itself can be traced to the Latin *educere*, which means "to lead out." Curriculum emerged from *currere*, which means "the course to be run." To deny or ignore the vital connection between physical development and cognitive performance is to conspire against our children and doom them to a culture no better than our own.

We owe each child a fair chance to develop a good physique, optimal organic function, and the ability to move well. Experts have noted the declining physical fitness of our youth for several generations. The issue has become especially public in the last few years as our children grow ever more inert, malformed, and clumsy. The physical devolution of our youth threatens our national security, national productivity, and cultural foundations. The rhetoric of "No Child Left Behind" seems hollow when we consider the possibility that the educational process might be robbing our young of their physical potential. Poor physical preparedness significantly impacts academic performance, and the steadily declining physical fitness of our youth clearly indicates the need for reform in our school environments and our physical education curricula.

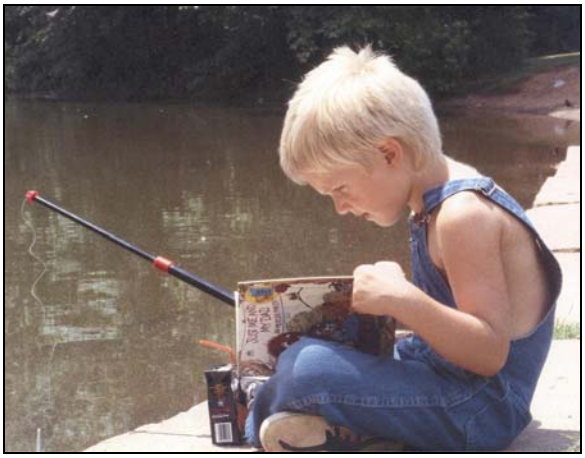
This article is aimed at assisting concerned administrators and physical educators who are reshaping their physical education curricula to meet the crisis. If our youth are to escape the decay of physical culture that is woven into the fabric of their daily lives, we must better prepare our current and future teachers, improve our physical education programs, and involve entire communities in the effort to mold our children into alert, disciplined, healthy and physically fit adults.

Chapter 12 of The Iowa Administrative Code can and should serve as a foundation for curriculum reform. It has

the full force and effect of law, and it includes the K-12 content areas of physical education that Iowa public and accredited private schools must teach. School administrators and physical educators can use these content areas to measure the quality of their current physical education programs, revise curricula, and improve the physical readiness of their students. At the kindergarten level, Chapter 12 requires the following:

> *The kindergarten program shall include experiences designed to develop healthy emotional and social habits and growth in the language arts and communication skills, as well as a capacity for the completion of individual tasks, and protect and increase physical well being with attention given to experiences relating to the development of life skills and human growth and development. A kindergarten teacher shall be licensed/certificated to teach in kindergarten. An accredited nonpublic school must meet the requirements of this subrule only if the nonpublic school offers a kindergarten program.*

Children often enter kindergarten with developmental deficiencies in body mechanics and posture that deserve immediate attention in both the gymnasium and classroom. This is especially important if patterns of poor body management are embedded into their home life. Kindergarten teachers often have only rudimentary knowledge of such issues, and it is common to find them modeling poor posture and providing their students with little if any leadership and instruction in good posture and body mechanics.



Poor body management skills in childhood often lead to adult postural deficiencies and inefficient body mechanics.

The early years of our profession were marked by a strong interest in the body's form and function, but physical education curricula that effectively teach good posture and body mechanics are rare today. Between 1958 and 1988, the Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance featured only one article exclusively concerned with posture (Althoff, Heyden, & Robertson, 1988).

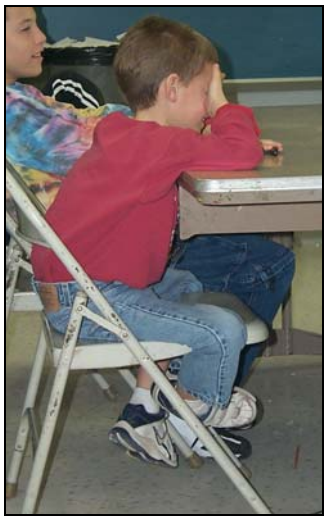
Thirty years ago in the 1970s when the theory of special physical education included corrective and developmental gymnastics designed to prevent and correct poor body management habits and acquired postural deformities, Fait (1972) estimated that at least 70% of children at that time were in need of attention. Far too many educators, then and now, have failed to address the issue. Most of our schools have simply abandoned their responsibility to protect children from acquired postural deformities and poor body mechanics.

Physical Education Content Requirements for Grades 1-6

Iowa has no minimum time requirement for elementary (grades 1-6) physical education, but the following content areas must be taught in our schools:

> *Movement experiences and body mechanics; fitness activities; rhythmic activities; stunts and tumbling; simple games and relays; sports skills and activities; and water safety.*

Body mechanics are specifically mentioned but commonly ignored at this level of education. Elementary school children sit for hours each day, more often than not, in poorly conceived and ill-fitting furniture that forces them into unhealthy postures. There they struggle, day after day, as their unprepared muscles labor under the stress of learning. As if to insure the damage to our young, some schools have even cut recess and physical education programs.



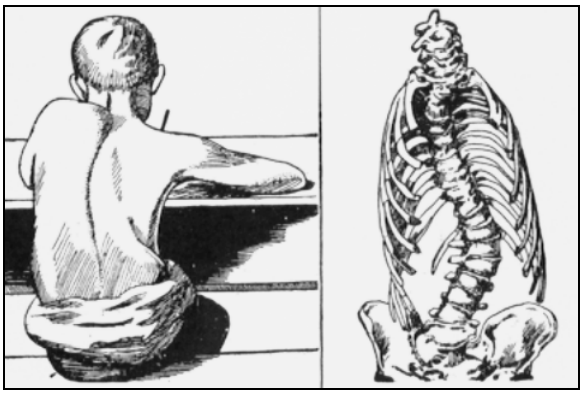
Ill-fitting furniture is a tragic reality in schools across the State of Iowa.

Well over a century ago in 1890, British surgeon Noble Smith presented at the annual meeting of the Medical Officers of Schools' Association in England on the topic of education without deformity. He spoke in sobering detail about the evil effects that prolonged hours of study can have on a child's body. Smith (1891) warned that the relatively short amount of time given to free and healthful exercise is not enough to compensate for the many hours children spend in "crooked postures." His numerous descriptions of the damage done to children by ignoring the natural laws that govern their growth and development are as timely today as they were in 1890. Smith said:

> *The spine and chest are the parts which chiefly suffer, and many consequent evils are apt to follow. If the chest becomes contracted by stooping over the desk, or from the effects of lateral curvature, an ungainly carriage and slouching figure are not the only evils which result. The general health will be affected; the lungs especially, and the organs of digestion very frequently will cease to do their work in a normal manner, and will be made more liable to attack by serious disease. (pp. 5-6)*

Physical educators have worked occasionally, throughout our history, with the medical community to prevent and correct problems associated with poor body mechanics and bad posture acquired during the educational process. Tremendous good could be accomplished if physical educators

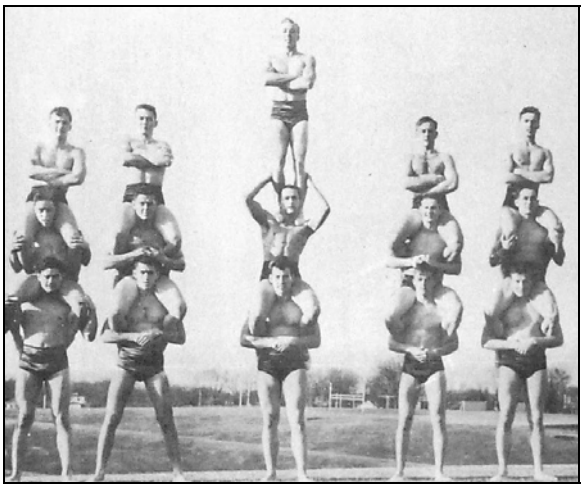
and classroom teachers would again become interested and proficient in these areas.



Physical educators can and should champion the prevention of school-based postural deformities.

Fitness activities, stunts, and tumbling have also lost ground in the elementary physical education curriculum. The move away from these areas can be traced back to the early 1920s, when some key leaders in our field lobbied successfully for an emphasis on sports and games at the expense of gymnastics and physical training. That period from around 1890 to 1920 is now known as "The Battle of the Systems." World War II forced physical educators to again address physical fitness, stunts, and tumbling.

The 1950s brought nationally publicized revelations concerning the declining fitness of our youth, and John F. Kennedy later took the lead in promoting physical fitness in and outside our schools. Physical educators were slow to respond, and sports and games remained the focus of their curricula. In recent years, physical fitness has gained new respect among many educators and is now appreciated by numerous physical educators across the State of Iowa who are rethinking their programs to update the physical fitness, stunts, and tumbling components of the elementary physical education curriculum.



WWII brought a renewed interest in off-the-ground physical training that was an integral part of physical education in the late-1800s.

Stunts and tumbling are self-testing activities that children and youth can perform alone, with a partner, or in a group. Equipment and/or apparatus can also be employed. Stunts and tumbling are generally noncompetitive and should be taught in rational progression. Physical educators published some excellent stunts and tumbling books during WWII. Stunts and Tumbling for Girls by Virginia Lee Horne (1943) is a great example of what a quality curriculum in this area can and should include. Horne wrote:

> *The ever-rising emphasis upon physical fitness casts new light upon those activities which involve the manipulation of the body in feats of skill and strength. The demands for individual control and development, as well as group perfection in*

> *stunts and tumbling, offer outcomes of learning that make a decided contribution in the physical education curriculum. (p.3)*

Like today, some very vocal physical educators in the 1940s argued against stunts and tumbling. In response to their criticisms, Horne wrote:

> *Academic arguments for the values and outcomes of stunts and tumbling can go on and on. The teacher who knows tumbling will recognize from her own experience that students find it satisfying and challenging to master feats of manipulating their own bodies in all sorts of patterns. Furthermore, it is fun. When a student participates in stunts and tumbling, she is broadening her physical, mental, and social resources. As a part of the physical education curriculum, tumbling really needs no justification. (p.4)*

Calisthenic training at The University of Iowa in the mid-1920s.

Unfortunately for today's children, the absence of progressive stunts and tumbling at the elementary school level will leave them unprepared to learn more complex patterns of movement on and off the ground as they graduate to middle and high school. Past and current arguments against teaching stunts, tumbling, and gymnastics across the curriculum have often centered on liability concerns, but the more important and fundamental issue of teacher interest, preparation, and competency is rarely discussed.

Teaching high-quality stunts and tumbling requires a considerable amount of technical skill and knowledge of methods. Water safety is another topic that often receives too little attention. It also requires teacher competency. Physical educators across Iowa with expertise in these areas should be identified and encouraged to help train those less prepared.

Physical Education Content Requirements for Grades 7-12

Sports, games, and leisure activities dominate most of our grades 7-12 physical education programs. Past attempts by many in our field to shift the curriculum toward physical fitness have been met with firm resolve by many others to continue on the current course. The controversy spans generations. Following the end of WWII, for instance, McCloy and Young (1945) edited the Iowa Program of Physical Education for Boys-Secondary Schools. The State of Iowa directed schools to shift toward an increased emphasis on physical fitness and left no doubt concerning the limitations of an over-emphasis on sports and games:

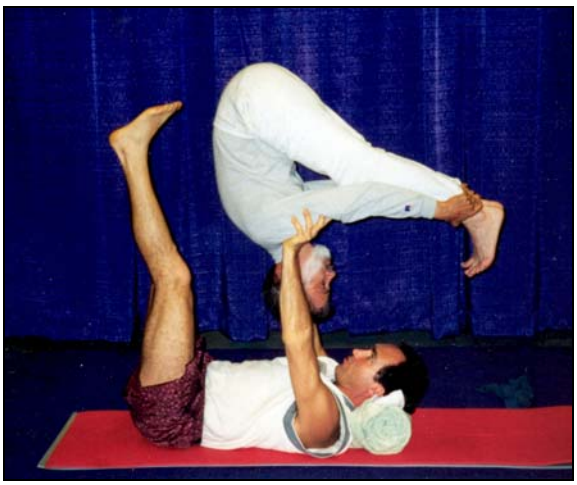
> *The high schools have usually failed to face reality as to their contributions to*

possible future adult physical education and recreation. They have generally assumed that if the major emphasis in high school physical education was on individual and team sports, such as tennis, golf, badminton, archery, volleyball, and softball, training in these sports would carry over into good and adequate after-school habits of recreation and exercise. All of the surveys have shown that this supposition is not true; and, moreover, if the training in sports did so carry over, in almost no community are there enough facilities for such recreation to accommodate 5 percent of the eighteen to forty-five year-old population. Yet this type of program for the high schools and colleges has been almost solely emphasized, and, as a result, physical education has, as a profession, done very little for the adult, after-school-age population; and the literature is strangely silent on methods for solving this problem. (p.263)

Proponents of the "old school" emphasis on physical fitness were given limited influence in the curriculum during and following WWII. Then and now, the sport/game model has endured. The modern term we often use is "physical activities," but the spirit of the notion has not changed since McCloy and Young questioned it over fifty years ago. Ironically, a K-12 physical education curriculum aligned with the more balanced "old school" model still endures in Chapter 12. It prescribes the following:

Physical fitness activities that increase cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength, and flexibility; sports and games; tumbling and gymnastics; rhythms and dance; water safety; leisure and lifetime activities.

Tumbling and gymnastics are still widely ignored in grades 7-12, but a curricular shift toward more emphasis on physical fitness and off-the-ground training is apparent nationwide. Equipment catalogs like Gopher and SportTime now promote traversing/climbing walls and "functional fitness" items. The National Association of Sport and Physical Education now supports the use of trampolines in the physical education program. The Physical Education for Progress Grants are leaning toward programs that promise increased levels of physical fitness.



Hand balancing is a great lifetime physical activity. Here the author (top) demonstrates inverted forward flexion.

This paradigm shift is bringing new challenges and opportunities to our field. Quality physical training is as much an art as it is a science, and today's physical educators are faced with large classes, a wide bell curve separating fit and unfit students, and limited class time. Conversely, if we rise to the challenge and develop programs that improve the physical readiness of our students, physical education will prove itself worthy of more support. As with stunts and tumbling, we are wise to look at past models as we reshape the physical fitness and gymnastics component of the grades 7-12 physical education curriculum.

Gymnastics is an especially important facet of Chapter 12, but it cannot be taught safely without considerable teacher skills and preparation. Gymnastics training has lived through numerous incarnations in our field. Throughout the ages, it has been shaped by martial, medical, and pedagogical forces, and connected to numerous descriptors such as corrective, preventive, military, orthopedic, medical, developmental, creative, educational, applied, remedial, and primitive.

Methods and materials for school gymnastics in the physical education curriculum will vary depending upon the grade level, teacher competency, and the amount of community and school support. Just as Swedish, German, Czechoslovakian, and other European-based gymnastics systems borrowed freely from the past and each other in the early years of our profession, so can today's physical educators find numerous curricular models, past and present, from which to form their own gymnastic programs.

The Czechoslovakian Sokols brought a highly developed system of physical culture to the United States.

Sports, games and leisure activities are an integral part of the Chapter 12 physical education content formula, and should not be excluded as school leaders reform their curricula. Physical fitness can and will be a natural outcome of quality programs that include all of the required content areas. The first step for Iowa schools, districts, and communities interested in reshaping their physical education curricula is to look beyond their current model and think carefully about what is best for the physical development of our youth. Then, with clear minds and firm resolve to do what is right, all involved should begin working to meet the content standards mandated in Chapter 12.

Our children and youth deserve quality physical education programs that meet or exceed State standards, and we must all be on guard to protect stunts, tumbling, gymnastics, physical fitness, and other critical skills from those who want to lower the bar. Model programs and progressive communities that demand and support cutting-edge physical education will help us all defend the Chapter 12 vision.

Non est vivere sed valere vita

Iowa's youth will profit from physical education programs that include rational progression, variety, and precision.

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