BUDGET CUTS SLASH PHYS ED

Reductions affect staffing, programming, fitness

In the 1980s, Eugene elementary school students got physical education (PE) four to five days a week year-round. Today, after years of budget cuts, most elementary schools have a PE teacher on-site just nine weeks a year, with some students getting PE just once a week. Last year, nine elementary schools had no PE teacher.

There's less PE in middle and high schools, too.

In many schools, the reductions in PE mean that numerous programs have disappeared. Gone are the before- and after-school physical activities, dance competitions, skating, jogathons, visits to adventure courses and outside lessons — for example, 30 years ago, 4J offered swimming lessons to all third graders.

"We no longer are exposing kids to things in schools in a deep way, as you did when you had a full-time specialist," says Rachel Farkas, a PE teacher who works at César E. Chávez and Edison elementary schools. "Today … it's so much shorter, [so there's] less opportunity to do different things and learn the terminology."

Since 2004, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education has recommended that schools provide 150 minutes of PE a week for elementary schoolers and 225 minutes a week for middle and high schoolers for the entire school year. No states meet all these requirements; Eugene students don't even come close.

Leslie Jaeger, an adapted PE specialist in 4J with more than 30 years of experience, remembers when her elementary students had PE four days a week. "With budget woes, [PE] is the first to go," she explains.

"With all we know about the rising rates of overweight, obese and unfit children and teens, along with the rising rates of lifestyle diseases such as cardiovascular disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes, and the correlation of personal health-related fitness status and higher levels of learning and GPA, it is a travesty that we can't offer more physical education," says Nanci McChesney-Henry, a PE teacher at Sheldon High School.

Fewer PE classes can also mean less academic learning, lower performance and more behavior problems.

THE BACK STORY

In 2007, 4J established minimum standards for student participation in PE activity and provided some program staffing of PE teachers, according to Kerry Delf, the district's communications coordinator. In 2007-08, the minimum standard for elementary schools was 60 minutes a week, to be provided on at least two different days a week. In 2008-09, that minimum rose to 75 minutes a week. In 2009-10, it climbed to 90 minutes a week.

The increases were due, in large part, to legislative efforts to boost the amount of time schoolchildren spent in PE. "PE teachers in the state worked really hard to get that passed," notes Edwin Jaffarian who taught PE in 4J for more than three decades, but because funding was cut, the standards "just went by the wayside."

In 2009-10, the minimum standards for elementary school dropped to 60 minutes a week, according to Delf. And in 2010-11 and 2011-12, "minimum standards for student participation in physical education activity [were] temporarily set aside due to budget limitations," Delf says.

Subsequently, decisions about PE staffing were made by each school rather than the district. 4J gave schools a certain amount of staff based on enrollment and student needs. "Schools were left with a 'Sophie's choice' between investing more of their staffing resources in classroom staff to reduce class size or investing more in specialist teachers to retain physical education and the arts, as well as prep and collaboration time for classroom teachers," Delf says.

This resulted in "significant variances and inequities across the district," continues Delf. Many schools didn't have a PE specialist. "With budgets continuing to shrink, the expectation was that this would become the case at more and more schools."

So at the start of this school year, 4J budgeted nine weeks of PE at every elementary school "to ensure that all elementary school students receive at least some physical education," Delf says, "and free schools from the dilemma of choosing between classroom teachers and specialists."

The rest of the year, classroom teachers teach PE. But some schools raise funds to pay for more PE teacher time; at those schools, students get more classes taught by a PE teacher.

A TALE OF TWO SCHOOLS

Two schools illustrate the differences in how PE is staffed. Like all elementary schools, Edison got its nine weeks of PE in September, then supplemented with funds raised. "This year, we have PE for the entire year," explains Tom Horn, Edison's principal. "Each student receives two classes per week."

Horn is well aware of the unfairness of the situation. "[The] rotation is intended to provide equity districtwide," he notes. "Some schools are not able to raise the dollar amounts that Edison has consistently raised over the years."

One such school is Awbrey Park. Juxtaposed with Edison's $85,000 annual fundraising, "our building is lucky to raise $10,000," Principal Joel Lavin says. Awbrey Park is a Title I school with almost 60 percent of students on free- and reduced-price lunches (compared with Edison's 27 percent). So students at Awbrey Park are making do with nine weeks of a PE specialist this year — still an improvement over last year, when the school was one of nine with no PE teacher.

At schools like Lavin's, the rest of the year, students are taught PE by their classroom teachers. "Usually, the students get to do this once a week," Lavin says.

The drawbacks to this arrangement include less preparation time for classroom teachers (who used to use the time their students were in PE to prepare and collaborate), less time for the actual PE class (because it can take longer for classroom teachers to set things up), less coordination of what's offered (because there are eight different classroom teachers teaching PE), and less opportunity for students to get in-depth instruction from trained specialists (according to some teachers, there's definitely activity, but it's usually not a planned-out program). In some schools, to get through academic material, the visit to the gym is passed over entirely.

Jaffarian, who started teaching PE in 1979 and is now retired, says "it's really hard" for classroom teachers to add PE to their responsibilities when they already have so many. And in terms of what's offered: "There's no comparison."

BEYOND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

In the middle and high schools, PE is still offered in all Eugene schools, but for less time than it was in decades past.

Jaeger says when she was a student at Roosevelt Middle School in the 1970s, she had four PE teachers — as did every middle school in Eugene. "Now, you're lucky if you have one." Roosevelt currently has one PE teacher who teaches three-quarters of the time and another who teaches half time.

In high schools, the number of PE teachers has also declined. Sheldon, for example, had the equivalent of nine PE teachers in the 1980s versus four today. Sheldon's McChesney-Henry says, "Measure 5 just really killed a lot of stuff. She adds,"In the midst of all of these budget cuts, we have maintained that strong commitment because we know it's good for kids, [but] there's just not enough of us to do the incredible job we need to do."

Class size has grown. "We have up to 45 or 50 in a class," McChesney-Henry continues. "Students can't get the same kind of individual attention that they deserve. Safety is also a huge concern."

The state requires one credit of PE for graduation, which means students take PE once in four years for up to a year. As a consequence, students' physical abilities have dropped. "I regularly used to have kids running 6- and 7-minute miles," McChesney-Henry explains. "Now it's a stretch to get them to run an 8-[minute mile]. Their fitness level, their attention span … for the majority of kids, we're really seeing a decline."

John J. Ratey, clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and coauthor of *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*, would agree. He notes that while only 6 percent of U.S. high schools offer a daily PE class, kids spend an average of 5.5 hours a day in front of a screen of some sort.

Without regular PE taught by specialists, kids have lost the chance to move around in a structured environment. Physical activity can go a long way toward helping kids stay healthy. "It's a huge equity issue," according to Farkas, who notes that it's in the lower-income schools that have fewer PE classes where you see more kids who are overweight and obese and at risk of diabetes. These kids are also less likely to participate in extracurricular sports, which can be too expensive for low-income families.

"Physical education has the potential to affect you every day for the rest of your life," McChesney-Henry says. "If you get into a class, the seeds are planted and you get motivated." She says, "I wish every kid would have the opportunity to do this every day."

BOOSTING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, TRUST

Fewer PE classes can also mean less academic learning, lower performance and more behavior problems. John Medina, a developmental molecular biologist and author of *Brain Rules*, cites studies showing that exercise helps children concentrate better, reduces disruptive behavior, boosts self-esteem and decreases depression and anxiety, all of which can improve academic performance.

Jaeger feels strongly about research like this — and she's seen how it plays out in the classroom. Classroom teachers say that after PE, kids "come back to class … able to learn better."

For kids with ADHD, "it's so hard to be in a place where your learning style is not taught to," she says. Behavior issues arise, attention span goes down, and grades plummet — and larger class sizes compound the issue. "Sometimes the only time these students feel good about themselves in a school setting is when they're moving," says Jaeger, who adds that she's seen a correlation between having such students participate in track and swimming and increases in their grades.

Cutting PE teachers, especially at the elementary level, also makes it harder for teachers to make valuable connections with their kids. Along with the cuts goes trust, says Farkas, who is teaching 1,300 elementary school students this year. Teachers who are on-site at one school for a full year, year to year, build relationships with their students. Under the current set-up, "you don't ever have a chance to learn all the kids' names," says Jaeger, who teaches at nine elementary schools.

Finally, having fewer PE teachers means those teachers are stretched thinner, making it difficult for them to do things like apply for grants for more funding for material. This creates a catch-22 situation that results in even fewer opportunities for children. ■

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