

Education needs more physical activity

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Why don't kids ever have homework in physical education classes?

It seems to me that for the last several years my two daughters have been bringing home all sorts of little homework reminders that seem designed to draw me into a nightly family squabble.

Generally, I try to sidestep these by having a professional obligation, like watching Monday Night Football, going to bed early or developing diarrhea.

But sometimes I cannot escape. In science, my daughters have had to find fungus and algae in our refrigerator so that they could humiliate their mother and father before their classmates and teachers.

In English, I have had to initial a variety of illegibly-mimeographed documents verifying that indeed these kids have spent some specified amount of time reading. I have signed for spelling words, study time and even flute practice, you name it.

The other night I had to attest that one of these kids had done some deep breathing exercises for choir, exercises which she was too embarrassed to show me. I had to take it on faith that the silence coming from her room for ten minutes consisted of diaphragmatic breathing.

I initialed anyway because it was worth it just to have the radio off for 10 minutes.

Never has either girl brought home a homework assignment from PE — never!

On the other hand, there have been several occasions when my children have been assigned the task of watching something on television and then reporting on it. I assume this is the 1980s equivalent of the book report,

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but that is another gripe.

It just seems to me that if the educational system is willing to condone passive learning by adding to the over 3 hours a day, or whatever, the average kid already spends watching television, they ought to balance it out with a bit of physical activity.

I find it ironic that despite the gnashing of teeth and the general wailing that goes on in the national press these days about the poor level of physical fitness in our children, especially Alaskan children, we do so little about it when there are so many simple things that could be done.

We could start by making PE a true part of the daily curriculum.

In every other discipline there is at least tacit acknowledgement that there is more to be learned than can be accrued during regular class hours. That is where homework enters in. That is what studying is all about.

If kids are so smart that they get their homework done during school, then there ought to be more of it or extra credit should be provided for homework done at home.

Rarely can one read *War and Peace* during school hours, or for that matter, even Mark Twain.

I have long since given up arguing about the need for five days of PE in elementary and high school. That

seems to be a lost cause. But surely someone out there ought to be bold enough to suggest that if we can only get in two days of PE per week IN SCHOOL, then let's require six days of PE homework per week.

Why is this so shattering a suggestion? Have I missed something obvious?

Is it the thought that PE homework is not enforceable? Do we think kids or their parents would lie about how many sit-ups or push-ups they had done or about how far they had walked, jogged, swam or skied? No one seemed real concerned about the fact that I signed off on my daughters' 15 minutes of silent reading or the 10 minutes of deep breathing.

Is it that kids might harm themselves and then there would be a lawsuit? The solution seems to be to provide instruction, pictorial manuals and written instructions. Briefings by the PE staff in the "how" and "why" of the program could be provided interested parents.

Do the PE teachers think they'll be out of a job? The problem that most PE teachers have now is that the kids they work with are, more often than not, out of shape slob.

If the kids did some physical homework, the teachers would have better, brighter specimens with which

to work and the entire physical education program would be lifted a notch.

What is wrong with basing physical education grades on performance, if we could measure performance by the progress, not the outcome. It seems so simple.

The PE teacher would first assess each child's strengths and weaknesses through a standard test such as is available through the American Alliance for Physical Education, Health, Recreation and Dance or the President's Council on Physical Fitness.

A personalized exercise prescription would then be provided emphasizing one or more of the main components of fitness: strength, flexibility, endurance and body composition. Even super-jocks can improve.

About 15 to 30 minutes of appropriate — and appropriate might mean family-based — exercise would then be required three to six days a week. Parents would be expected to document performance and could even be encouraged to participate.

PE classtime could then be used to reinforce technique and monitor progress. Those involved in appropriate clubs or sports programs could get at least partial credit for participation.

What am I missing? Why are we so afraid to acknowledge that the body needs homework as much as does the mind? Why is physical education treated with such kid gloves? Why isn't PE on par with band, orchestra or choir?

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Editor's Note: Dr. Jay E. Caldwell is the founder and director of the Alaska Sports Medicine Clinic.