

Introduction

State Level Assessment in Physical Education: The South Carolina Experience

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There is a health crisis facing our nation. Physical inactivity is a major problem, and physical education programs are uniquely positioned to contribute across genders and socioeconomic levels to the solution. To gain the support of the general public and policy makers, however, physical educators must accomplish two related but different goals. One goal is to create programs that effectively educate students for a lifetime of physical activity. The other goal is to document that programs can be effective change agents. Unless both of these goals can be accomplished, physical education will remain at best a marginalized subject area within the school program.

For a variety of reasons, as a field we have not been successful at producing large-scale change necessary to improve school programs in physical education (see Rink and Mitchell, 2002). Nor have we been players in most large-scale school reform efforts. This failure to be included in school reform efforts can be attributed to, among other things, the marginalized status of physical education within the school curriculum and the fact that physical educators have not made a good case to be included (Ward & Doutis, 1999). The standards, assessment, and accountability reform movement initiated in 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) continues to dominate both national and state initiatives to improve school effectiveness. For the most part, physical educators have not been players in that movement.

State Level Assessment in Physical Education: The South Carolina Experience reports the efforts of physical education professionals in one state to be a part of the standards, assessment, and accountability reform movement dominating school reform efforts in the state. The monograph reports the results of that participation on program change and student achievement in the high schools of the state and addresses the issues related to the potential of state level program assessment to change physical education programs.

The standards, assessment, and accountability movement involves establishing clear expectations for what students should know and be able to do. Over the past ten years, content area experts in each of the subject areas of the school curriculum have established national standards describing those expectations. Many states have established content standards. State standards typically fall somewhere on a continuum of adaptation beyond recognition through total adoption of national standards. South Carolina is one of the states that have adapted the national content standards in physical education to fit local circumstances.

In addition to establishing standards, the current reform movement involves developing assessment materials and programs to determine the extent to which students meet content standards. This process involves taking broad standards and defining with a high level of specificity what it is that a student should know and be able to do. Next, valid, reliable and practical assessment materials must be developed to determine the extent to which students actually meet those expectations.

With few exceptions, physical education has largely not progressed beyond the development of standards in the standards assessment and accountability movement, although the National Association for Sport and Physical Education is now in the process of developing both performance indicators and assessment materials for the national standards. In order to assess student achievement in standards, you have to define exactly what the standards mean in terms of expectations for student achievement. As a professional group, physical educators have been reluctant to make those decisions. Perhaps this reluctance is based on a commitment to the autonomy of individual programs and teachers to meet the unique needs of their students or to the idea that it is not educationally sound to have one standard for students with different potentials. This reluctance to define content in a specific way may also be attributed to the comprehensive nature of the subject matter itself and a lack of professional consensus on the most important content to teach. Unless states and programs are willing to take this step in specifically defining expectations for achievement, it is not possible to develop either assessment materials or assessment programs to measure achievement in the standards.

Assessment materials and a viable assessment program are necessary but not sufficient to become participants in any substantive reform effort. Some level of accountability for performance must also be planned. Accountability is largely created by policy decisions at the school, district, or state level. Establishing policy for accountability is perhaps the most difficult aspect of being a participant in substantive reform, particularly for a marginalized subject area within the school curriculum. Physical educators are oftentimes reluctant to do what they need to do politically, whether locally or at the state level, to be included with other curricular areas that have established accountability for their content areas.

In 1994 the professionals in South Carolina, acting through the state professional organization (South Carolina Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance), began a journey to be included in the state school reform effort. The journey began by establishing standards and continued by developing assessment materials for those standards, establishing a state level assessment program and seeking accountability for school performance based on student achievement. High schools submitted the first set of data to the state in spring 2001. Most physical educators have little experience with either comprehensive formal assessment of student learning or accountability for student achievement. The authors offer this monograph as an exploration into the potential of both to substantively change physical education programs.