Walking the Walk: High School Principal Champions PE as Foundation for Lifelong Fitness

**Issue:** To Fair Haven Union High School Principal Brett Blanchard, requiring students to sit still in a classroom for hours is counterproductive. A vocal proponent of lifelong physical activity, the Vermont educator “walks the walk” — quite literally — by conducting meetings and phone conversations from the treadmill that replaces his office desk and chair. He contends that the traditional paradigm of learning has contributed to some of our society’s biggest health challenges: inactivity, obesity and overmedication.

Blanchard is the first to point out the shortcomings of traditional athletics: they exclude the vast majority of students, do not foster individuality, and are rarely practiced throughout life. He now travels the world to pursue long-distance skating, ultra-marathons, obstacle-course racing, and high jumping. His goal as an educator is to engage his students in activities they can enjoy and reap long-term benefits from for the rest of their lives.

**Big Idea:** Blanchard knows firsthand the importance of giving students the freedom to choose activities that appeal to their individual interests, thus taking the reins of their own fitness. With this in mind, he decided to develop a program that would involve 100 percent of the school’s 450 students. The first step? Have students create a personal digital fitness plan and share it with their parents. The unorthodox program required “buy-in” from parents and the administration — many of whom, admittedly embarrassed by their own lack of fitness, were uncomfortable broaching the topic. Blanchard first introduced the idea to parents and students during an eighth-grade open house to ready them for the high school experience.

**Implementation:** In 2015, with the help of two physical education teachers, SHAPE America members Adam Greenlese and Joel Beste, Fair Haven required all incoming freshmen to develop digital fitness portfolios that tracked their progress. The students selected their

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SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators is the nation’s largest membership organization of health and physical education professionals. The organization sets the standard for health and physical education in the U.S., and its National Standards for K-12 Physical Education serve as the foundation for well-designed physical education programs across the country. SHAPE America was also a proud member of the coalition that developed the National Health Education Standards, and is a founding partner of the Presidential Youth Fitness Program, Let’s Move! Active Schools and the Jump Rope For Heart/Hoops For Heart programs.

shapeamerica.org
own goals, listed personal obstacles, and included results of fitness tests with weekly monitoring of results. The school also expanded their after-school activities to include snowboarding, hunting, fishing and obstacle racing. Many students headed into the wilderness to hone camping, backpacking and mountaineering skills. Still others started a community-wide 5K race, competed in obstacle-course racing, and founded activity clubs.

A senior who was passionate about horseback riding restructured her senior class schedule to compete nationally in equestrian events. Another student competed in the Obstacle Course Racing World Championships, finishing in the top 10. Blanchard knew the competitiveness of traditional sports could be incorporated in a healthy way into all types of activities and encouraged students to challenge each other as they pushed their own limits. The basics of healthy nutrition were taught and reinforced as a key component of physical education and health.

**Takeaway:** Schools can use state high school physical education requirements (1.5 years in Vermont) as a springboard to a lifetime of fitness by helping students take ownership of their own programs. Students who might typically avoid traditional high school sports can benefit from personal athletic endeavors that could turn into lifelong passions. By broadening their viewpoint of sports and making PE a curriculum priority, school leaders can ensure that all students build an early foundation that can profoundly affect their future. Technology also can be a useful tool in encouraging students to be more mindful as they track their movements throughout the day and see how activity levels affect their heart rates.

**Results:** The benefits of Fair Haven’s broad-based approach to fitness have been far-reaching. “It has changed the lives of many of our students,” says Blanchard. He cites examples of one student who lost 20 pounds, became fit, and realized her goal of getting into the military. Another student drastically increased his confidence and self-perception to such an extent that he became a personal trainer and leader at an outdoor center. And while traditional team sports continue to receive the highest number of participants, athletics that allow full participation of all students continue to grow and receive recognition.

The school also has seen improvements in overall academic performance that coincide with the growing emphasis on lifelong fitness, including earning Best High School Awards in 2012, 2013 and 2015 (U.S News & World Report and Newsweek).

Elected to the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) Board of Directors as the New England Representative (District 1) in 2015, Blanchard is now working with his colleagues to improve school fitness requirements at the state level. In 2013, he created the first high school obstacle race for Spartan Race that included more than 200 participants from six states.