Individual Attention and District-Wide ‘PE Culture’ Keeps New York Students Moving Through Life

**Issue:** The nature of physical education creates a unique grading challenge for teachers who want to foster a lifelong love of physical activity. Should passing grades be awarded simply for showing up, participating and not misbehaving — or should knowledge, performance and mastery serve as the major criteria? How much weight do you give each of the factors involved in a physical activity? And, given that students will not excel at everything, will a low grade in one activity potentially discourage their participation in that activity (and maybe others) in the future?

Performance comprises 60% of students’ PE grades at Victor Senior High School in New York’s Finger Lakes region, where students understand they must achieve certain outcomes — whether they are aiming arrows at a target, summiting a wall, or navigating fat tires down a mountain trail.

For 15 years, the high school’s recently retired director of physical education, health & athletics, Ron Whitcomb, helped build a diverse, skills-based program that gives assessments at every level. Whitcomb, a SHAPE America member, believes that with clear expectations and individual work, you can hold students accountable for PE and ignite a passion for activity that will carry them through college and beyond.

**The Big Idea:** “By having a rubric for every activity, we know what the most important skills are that every teacher has to teach, and students clearly know whether they are meeting the challenge,” he says. It sounds simple — until you see the variety of activities offered at Victor Senior High School, including swimming, canoeing, kayaking, rock climbing, mountain climbing, mountain biking, cross-country skiing, ice skating, ballroom dancing, tennis, badminton, archery, golf, baseball, basketball, pickleball, volleyball, spinning, yoga, self-defense, and, starting next year, paddleboarding and fly-fishing.

The Victor Central School District has always prioritized PE — so much so that it built a large aquatic center and indoor climbing wall. The high school’s 85-minute PE classes are offered four days a week, allowing time to bus students to local lakes, parks, mountain biking trails, a nearby skating rink, and other surrounding natural and man-made resources.

Activities change every five weeks and almost all are optional — except aquatics, which is required for all of the district’s 4,000 students in grades 1-12. Whitcomb wrote the original K-12 curriculum based on the 1994 “Goals 2000” program and then spent 15 years “putting the pedal to the metal” to ensure its continued improvement.

“We’ve worked with the district to add new equipment, like kayaks, bows and arrows, and mountain bikes, a few at a time,” he says.
“Offering a plethora of activities is only one solution for hooking students on physical activity for life,” says Whitcomb. “The key is finding a way to connect to those kids who say they don’t like PE. You need to knock down that wall by making them feel comfortable — talking with them and understanding who they are,” he says. “You have 25 kids in a class and you need to treat each one differently.”

All students in the district become proficient swimmers, for example, because the two aquatics teachers and seven PE teachers work with them individually to make sure they have mastered each stroke before “getting in over their head.” Proficiency comprises 60% of the grade; the rest is equally divided between demonstrating personal and social responsibility and cognitive mastery of an activity’s skills, rules, etc.

“Like English, math or any other class, we deliver information, content and knowledge,” says Whitcomb. “Students understand they need to earn their grade.”

Each activity’s expectations, which have been approved by the administration and Board of Education, are clearly outlined during parent orientation at the start of each school year.

“If a parent has a question, they can call a teacher and the teacher will explain why the student got that grade,” Whitcomb says. “It is so well-defined up front that teachers get almost zero calls, and students always get the grade they expect. Each student knows we will work with them to be successful.”

**Results:** Although Whitcomb believes his curriculum is one of the best in the U.S., he says the real “measuring stick” of its success is seeing students get excited about physical activity and choose to continue it beyond high school.

“When you hear them talk about how they learned to do an Eskimo roll in a kayak and reach the top of a rock wall or a mountain, you know you have made a big impact on their life,” he says. “Our kids often say that PE was one of the most influential classes they took in school, and some even go on to become PE teachers.”

**Takeaway:** The continuity of a 15-year-old program creates a school culture that celebrates physical education, Whitcomb says. “Kids grow up in an environment where activity is part of their school experience from preK on,” he says. “Every teacher believes in it and does it themselves. As a result, I could count on one hand the number of kids who aren’t participating.”

 SHAPE America’s National Standards for Physical Education

The physically literate individual:

- Demonstrates competency in a variety of motor skills and movement patterns.
- Applies knowledge of concepts, principles, strategies and tactics related to movement and performance.
- Demonstrates the knowledge and skills to achieve and maintain a health-enhancing level of physical activity and fitness.
- Exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others.
- Recognizes the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction.

**Program Team**

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- Effective Instruction
- Healthy Behaviors & Physical Activity
- Advocacy

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