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A New Era of Physical Education

If you ever heard the ring of the school bell telling you it was time for Physical Education and thought to yourself “Is this really necessary? I hate PE,” you are not alone. There are many people who think of Physical Education with a negative connotation, but surely there must be a better way to encourage adolescents to exercise. A 2016 study by the National Physical Activity Plan found that “one half of all US high school students do not attend PE classes daily” (Parr). Everyone is familiar with the social structure and shame that often correlates with PE in our minds, but mandated PE classes in schools do not have to be like that. Meaningful PE is a way to teach students about ways to exercise and stay healthy, while getting them moving in a positive, encouraging environment that does not cause any student stress. While Physical Education can create harmful hierarchies in schools, states should mandate meaningful Physical Education for high schoolers because it helps decrease levels of stress, encourage physical health, and improve academic performance.

Current Physical Education can be harmful to students' mental health, while having no effect on their physical health. The current system of PE encourages the formation of hierarchies based on athleticism and these hierarchies can lead to bullying and a lack of participation in the class. It is a major source of stress for many students as they feel pressure to participate, but are scared to try because oftentimes the highly athletic and popular students are the only ones who get to participate. The athletic kids tend to only pass the ball to or cooperate with each other,

ignoring the less athletic or less popular students and depriving them of the opportunity for exercise during school. This lack of participation from the socially or physically awkward high schoolers causes PE to have no effect on the physical health of most students. This social structure creates the “impression that athletic children are superior to the unathletic,” which creates a harmful and counterproductive environment (Parr). The whole purpose of Physical Education is to help students live healthy lives and counteract the high obesity rates, but current methods of PE do not accomplish this. Many students would say that this is reason enough to remove the PE requirement. Furthermore, a high school student observed that current PE classes were “focusing on superficial number[s],” such as the Body Mass Index, which actually do not reflect the current health of the students (Parr). The current ways of measuring health in students accomplish none of their goals, instead making students feel inadequate and creating a negative environment. The current methods of PE are so harmful that many high school students argue that it “should not be required” for them, as the negatives of the current system outweigh the benefits (Parr). Many students have taken this into their own hands, choosing to skip school rather than attend another humiliating Physical Education class, which is very detrimental to their education. As previously stated, “one half of all US high school students do not attend PE classes daily,” showing that they would rather ditch school than attend PE (Parr). Some people argue that because the current system of PE keeps students from their academic work and destroys their mental health, it should be removed. However, there must be a better option to improve the Physical Education experience than removing the whole requirement. The way to do this would be to make PE meaningful by creating a positive atmosphere that encourages all students to improve their physical health, without shaming them.

Meaningful Physical Education is beneficial to improving physical health and encouraging healthy lifestyles. A meaningful PE program would not just get kids moving during the class, but would encourage further exercise outside of school. Students would be allowed to gain a “feeling of confidence and competence in movement” in a supportive environment, which, due to the associations formed in their brains between exercise and positive emotions, would encourage them to exercise in the future (Fitzgerald). While the current system creates an association between exercise and negative emotions, causing some to argue for its removal, simple improvements could be made to make PE a positive experience. Furthermore, PE in schools is often the “only organized way for many lower-income kids to get much-needed exercise,” and the elimination of a PE requirement would further increase the “devaluation of [PE] programs,” therefore reducing the opportunities for exercise in lower income areas (Pothamsetty). To take away the PE requirements would be to deprive these children of exercise and increase the disease rates in areas where the ability to pay for health care is already a major worry. Meaningful Physical Education would help prevent some unnecessary and stressful healthcare costs that would arise due to inactivity by helping these students be active. Therefore, instead of removing PE from the list of graduation requirements, we should improve the methods of PE to make it meaningful to students by encouraging them to exercise and helping to improve their physical health.

Although current forms of PE are not beneficial to mental health, meaningful Physical Education helps build confidence and improve mental health. When meaningful PE creates a supportive and safe environment where everyone is encouraged to exercise without judgment and collaborate to accomplish physical activities. This form of physical education is

invaluable for the promotion of mental health in schools because exercise releases endorphins, which are neurotransmitters in the brain that are known to improve mood, lower stress, and build confidence, plus the atmosphere in the classes would be positive and supportive. In many current PE classes, the benefits of these endorphins are outweighed by detrimental effects of the idolization of athleticism and the comparison of students to arbitrary standards. This is seen in an op-ed on the benefits of PE, which states that instead of teaching about the benefits of running and improving cardiovascular endurance, students were sent to the track and “pressured to run it under a certain time” (Pomara). PE tends to cater to the students who are physically fit and naturally athletic, while ignoring the differences in ability of other students. This commonly leads to harmful comparisons of the less athletic students and creates a sense of disinterest in exercise due to the shame of not being “athletic enough” to meet the standards. Although some would argue that the current system is pointless and should no longer be a requirement, I would disagree because of the potential benefits. PE should be improved instead of removed from the list of graduation requirements. Beyond the obvious physical curriculum of PE, a meaningful Physical Education course would also teach “mental, social, and emotional education” (Fitzgerald). This mental and emotional education would help students understand the importance of mental health and learn methods to improve their own mental health. Many students would benefit from this because it would allow them to help manage their stress and build their confidence in overcoming challenges, which would in turn improve their mental health. The mental health benefits of meaningful Physical Education are invaluable for students in high school and will continue to be beneficial to the student for their entire life. Improving the current Physical Education system to increase the meaning of the course and maintaining the

graduation requirement would help secure these benefits for millions of students, and therefore meaningful Physical Education should be required for graduation.

When Physical Education is meaningful, the benefits can be seen in academic performance. Exercise has been shown to increase memory, mood, and focus, which can help a student succeed in an academic setting. Meaningful PE can benefit students because “exercise improves school performance and, in fact, children have an easier time focusing and learning after they have exercised” (Champion). Meaningful Physical Education also has the potential to improve overall performance in schools, which means that we should improve the atmosphere to encourage students to enjoy it. When students enjoy their meaningful PE and are excited to attend, they are receiving the mental health benefits, which in turn improve their attitudes towards school as a whole and help them achieve more in their classes. Schools should require meaningful Physical Education because it helps them achieve their purpose as educational institutions by teaching students and helping them to achieve their maximum potential in the classroom.

While Physical Education can create harmful hierarchies in schools, states should mandate meaningful Physical Education for high schoolers because it helps decrease levels of stress, encourage physical health, and improve academic performance. The harmful hierarchies that are often seen in PE are a major problem for the health of the public and the achievements of students, yet meaningful PE should be mandated in high schools. In order to improve the mental and physical health of students, as well as helping them secure the futures they want after high school, we must improve the current Physical Education system to make PE something that students are excited for, instead of something they want to skip.

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