

The power of a student-based curriculum

The principal of Kent Elementary School in Agassiz shares a student-based success story from his last year as a high school physical education teacher.

by Chris Wejr

The following article was first published on Chris Wejr's blog, The Wejr Board, which can be found

at:
<http://mrwejr.edublogs.org/>

Chris can also be followed on Twitter

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Children should be given a voice not only about the means of learning but also the ends, the why as well as the what.

Alfie Kohn

In an education world dominated by mandated curricula and standardized testing, it is often difficult to imagine the effectiveness of a student-designed curriculum.

Prior to my days as a principal of an elementary school, I had the privilege of working as a high school math, science and physical education teacher. As I currently try to get back into shape, I have begun to reflect on the motivation to be healthy as well as events that took place during my final year of teaching high school; in 2006, I was involved in one of my proudest accomplishments as an educator.

At my previous school, grade 10 girls physical education classes were

the classes that PE teachers were not requesting to teach. The students were labeled as challenging, unmotivated and often absent. These classes were often given to new teachers or temporary teachers (*this is a whole other topic*). I, too, struggled to find ways for these students to become motivated to participate in the various athletic units that we were supposed to be teaching. We tried many different strategies (many of them reward-driven, but when the rewards disappeared, so did the motivation) including co-ed PE and different streams of PE. After a few years of observing and participating in this challenging class, a colleague and I decided to do something that

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should have been done many years ago. Instead of trying to change the students, I would try to change the way PE 10 Girls was taught.

In the spring of 2006, I was teaching two blocks of PE 10 girls and instead of forcing them to do things they disliked, we spent a few classes focused on the following question: *If you could design a physical education class for girls, what would it look like?* They had to describe scheduling, activities, assessment and any details that came up in discussions. At the end, the goal was to implement the class the following year. The students knew that they were in grade 10 and therefore, the class they were designing was unfortunately not going to be open to them the following year.

I was overwhelmed by the discussions that took place during the few weeks that this went on (in between classroom sessions, we began to implement some of their ideas too!). Following are the thoughts about the problems with the current program that the students came up with:

- they don't like to sweat first period because they just got ready for school; they also don't like to sweat too much during third period as then they would have to sit through fourth period sweaty and red in the face (note: we were on a linear schedule so students had PE every second day; the blocks also tumbled so they would have it on a

- different period each day)
- they were sick of being forced to learn rules and participate in sports they disliked; they felt these sports had no relevance to them
- they did not like being assessed on skills for sports (the girls who were already involved in those sports outside of class just got the better mark)
- they did not like being forced to run — there were other ways to get in shape!
- they liked it better when the teachers were involved in the class rather than sitting on the sidelines
- most were not motivated by grades — many just wanted to get a high enough mark to get credit for the course
- they did not like the feeling of not being good at something and then forced to participate in an activity in which their lack of skills were ostracized; they would rather not participate than be out

there and look silly.

As you can see, there were some definite problems with the current manner in which PE was taught. Following this discussion, they had to come up with answers to the original question. Here are the strategies that they came up with:

- more individual activities (less focus on zero sum games, win/loss)
- they wanted to stay/get in shape but in ways of their choice (ideas included more dance, gymnastics, aerobics, power walking, stretching, yoga, pilates, circuits, etc)
- they wanted to see lighter workouts in the first and third periods and harder workouts in the second and fourth periods
- they would rather focus on heart rate than times during runs, etc
- they wanted say in the activities that were offered
- they felt they should be assessed on effort and projects (projects on issues that matter to their health), not on skill level (they said some people came to class with more skill than others and they should not be punished for not being taught those skills earlier)



Cover story

Our cover art this month is an oil pastel self-portrait by Coen Leopkey Johnson, who is a grade 6 student at Arden Elementary in Courtenay. Our thanks to Coen, his teacher, Chris Lamont, and Geoff Manning, principal.

- they liked the idea of guest instructors from the community
- they weren't sure, but pondered the idea about students teaching mini-classes
- rather than wait and see if this worked the following year, they wanted to see if it worked *now!*

Immediately following this discussion I started to become a PE facilitator rather than the PE teacher. I organized the schedule two weeks at a time (one week in advance) and included the students in all decisions. I brought in university students, community members, parents, senior students and businesses to teach dance, yoga, pilates, gymnastics and aerobics.

The rest of the year was a phenomenal success! Attendance was rarely

an issue and students were pumped to see their ideas implemented! I became more involved in the classes as I took the classes with the students. I think I was able to actually touch my toes after a few yoga sessions! I also taught a few classes of box aerobics, circuit training, core strength and gymnastics.

As we neared the end of the year, a student said, 'I never thought about this until now but what is my mark?' I responded with 'what do you think you should get?' This conversation happened with each student (most were harder on themselves than I would have been so we negotiated a better grade). In addition to this, I was there participating with the students in each class so I was continually assessing the efforts and participation of the students. I had students fill out a course evaluation at the end of the year and every one was positive; the only suggestion for

implementation they wanted was a class like this offered for them in grade 11.

We changed the name of the class from PE 10 Girls to Lifestyles Fitness 10 and it was offered to the current grade 9s to select for the following year. More than 75% of the girls wanted to take the class but I only had one period scheduled for me to teach and no other teacher wanted to do it. As we were limited in space we had to accept only the first 35 students.

The next year built on the early successes as I continued to facilitate with a new group of students. I brought in members from outside the school to guest teach, I had students bring in fitness DVDs, and we participated in projects and presentations about information that was important to the students (crash diets, eating disorders, peer pressure, bullying, nutrition, impact of media,



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etc). We scheduled activities such as power walking, yoga, stretching, pilates in first and third periods and activities like jogging, aerobics (Tae-Bo was a favourite!), dance, and circuit training in the second and fourth periods. Assessments were based on student conversations around their efforts in class activities as well as projects; we also came up with criteria at the start of the year about what good learning and participation would look like. The schedule continued to be decided weeks in advance (especially to schedule guest teachers) and a few students stepped up as representatives to help with scheduling.

As a teacher, I don't think I realized how great this class became until after it was over. The best compliment came when a group of students approached me after school one day and said, 'we want to start a LifeStyles Fitness 11 class next year.' I approached my department head and he said as long as the numbers were there, he would make it happen. When the course selections came back in to the counselors, we were able to offer both classes for the following year!

I wish I could take the credit for

this, but this was all from the students. It is amazing what students can accomplish if we listen. The grade 10 girls PE students weren't the problem; the PE 10 girls class was the problem. Once the real problem was determined, we could work on a solution.

I realize that I was able to do this because I was teaching a course

without a standardized test; however, this is yet another example of how effective learning can be if we moved away from a world of mandated curricula and testing to a world in which students and teachers had more voice and flexibility into the means and ends of learning that takes place in a class. 

Chris Wejr is principal at Kent Elementary School in Agassiz, BC. He has spent his career working with students as a high school physical education, math, and science teacher, an intermediate teacher, an elementary vice-principal, as well as a high school volleyball, rugby, track and basketball coach. In addition to his blog and Twitter account, he can be reached at cwejr@sd78.bc.ca

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