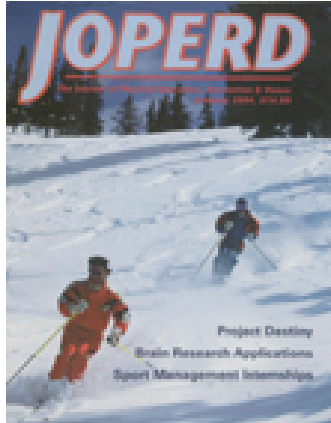


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Thinking Outside the Box: Placing Park and Recreation Professionals in K-12 Schools

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It is time to place park and recreation professionals in K-12 schools—not only as after-school caregivers, teacher aides, and ancillaries to the educational enterprise, but as full-fledged partners in the educational process. This proposal is based on the following six facts: (1) public school facilities are grossly underutilized; (2) most of a child's life takes place outside of the classroom; (3) park and recreation programs effectively hook and hold children's attention for educational purposes; (4) park and recreation professionals have substantial teaching and counseling experience; (5) park and recreation professionals understand the importance of educating the whole child; and (6) the synergistic possibilities are extensive.

Underutilized School Facilities

Crompton (2000) makes a compelling case for the more efficient use of a school's physical plant by structuring its usage to serve both school and community needs. Crompton reasons that school facilities usually operate at only 18 percent of their full capacity. (This assumes that a school is used for nine hours per day times 180 days per year, for a total of 1,620 hours versus a potential usage of 24 hours per day times 365 days per year, or 8,760 hours.) If school facilities were available to the community Mondays through Fridays from 5 p.m. to 12 a.m., Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m.,

Sundays from 12 p.m. to 10 p.m., and 16 hours per day on 81 school vacation days, the total community usage would equal 43 percent of the physical plant's capacity. Together, the school and community usage would then total 61 percent of the school facility's potential.

Crompton adds that community recreation facilities usually are underused during the school day, while school facilities normally are underused after school. By taking advantage of recreational facilities that already exist at schools (e.g., gyms, swimming pools, tracks, baseball diamonds, football fields, soccer complexes, tennis courts, libraries, auditoriums, etc.), communities and taxpayers alike could be served better.

In order to implement the kind of cooperation that Crompton wants, there are a lot of obstacles to overcome, from a potential conflict over sharing the school equipment and supplies to increasing managerial complexity. The obstacles, however, appear surmountable in the name of the public interest and fiscal responsibility. The joint use of a single facility by teachers and park and recreation professionals may result in periodic friction in regard to the care, maintenance, and storage of equipment and supplies, but it is important to remember that those resources belong to the community, not to the individuals in charge of them. To make this collaboration work, school employees must relinquish any sense of personal own-

ership of the school's facility and property. Finally, Crompton states that if schools are managed properly, they have the potential to serve a much larger social function as centers of activity that can create a strong sense of community.

We begin our proposal, then, with the knowledge that there are important cost savings in bringing park and recreation professionals into the schools. In fairness to Crompton, however, the reader must remember that he is not calling for park and recreation professionals to "infiltrate" the educational domain. Instead, he is calling for a more efficient sharing of the facilities' physical space between the schools and the park and recreation profession. Crompton provides a good rationale for allowing park and recreation professionals onto school grounds, but he stops short of suggesting, as we do, that they deserve more than just a foot in the door.

Life Outside the Classroom

There is more to a child's life and learning than what occurs inside the classroom. Teachers understand this as well as anyone else. Having closer contact with allied professionals who work with children in other contexts can only help classroom teachers do a better job of meeting the educational needs of their students. Just as social workers, by making home visits, gain insight into the conditions that affect a child's learning, park and recreation professionals obtain relevant insight



If schools do not double as recreation centers, their facilities may go unused as much as 82 percent of the time.

by observing those same children during their free time. Children often behave differently when they are playing than when they are sitting behind a desk. In addition, children often are more open and revealing of themselves during their free time. Park and recreation professionals can advise teachers about observed behaviors in ways that can improve a child's classroom performance (Shinew, Hibbler, & Anderson, 2000).

The importance of this kind of collaboration cannot be overstated—especially at a time when the nation is preoccupied with test scores as the ultimate measure of educational success. The pressure to limit teaching goals to a narrow set of competencies that students must acquire in order to pass local, state, and national academic achievement tests must be resisted. What school systems need instead is teamwork—a collaborative effort of gargantuan proportions based on an understanding of all the influences that help and hinder the growth and development of each child.

Teaching and Counseling Experience

The knowledge that park and recreation professionals have acquired from their own higher education and related work experiences adds to the

attractiveness of placing them in K-12 schools. Many park and recreation professionals have considerable classroom and field experience in recreation administration, planning, programming, and evaluation. Moreover, strong interpersonal skills—honed in recreational leadership positions—are their forte. They possess many of the same qualities as effective teachers (Weissinger, 2001). Though lacking in formal pedagogical training, park and recreation professionals regularly teach and counsel in nontraditional educational settings—camps, nature centers, parks and preserves, sports facilities, and similar venues. This aspect of their professional experience is often overlooked. The difference between park and recreation professionals and teachers is both figuratively and literally a matter of degree. In this regard, a park and recreation professional equipped with a teaching credential would be an asset in any K-12 school.

After-School Programs

Efforts to provide after-school programs have increased considerably over the past five years. It is estimated that approximately 6,800 rural and inner city public schools in 1,420 communities currently participate in the 21st Century Community Learning

Centers (CCLCs), a component of the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The 21st CCLCs provide children with opportunities to learn and develop new skills in after-school programs. In addition to tutorial services, 21st CCLCs offer a variety of programs, such as drug and violence prevention, character education, art, music, and recreation.

In addition to the 21st CCLC initiative, the literature abounds with examples of successful after-school recreation programs for children, especially at-risk children, during what otherwise would be a very dangerous time of the day (Eccles & Appleton Gootman, 2002; Mastroski & Keeter, 1999). During the after-school hours, before parents get home, children often get into trouble (Sickmund, Snyder, & Poe-Yamagata, 1997). Recreation programs are extremely valuable in keeping children out of trouble during these hours (Schreffler, 2002). They not only divert children from antisocial behavior, but they help to accomplish other educational goals that are more difficult to attain in the traditional classroom (Alexander, 2000; Shinew, Hibbler, & Anderson, 2000). Furthermore, offering after-school recreation programs at schools solves one of the biggest problems facing program administrators—transporting students from school to the recreation facility. By allowing park and recreation professionals to provide after-school programs at schools, a major transportation problem is avoided, thus removing a significant barrier to participation (Crompton, 2000).

Recreation is an essential part of a student's education (Bullock, Morris, Mahon, & Jones, 1992), yet it remains underutilized in schools (Aston-Shaeffer, Johnson, & Bullock, 2000). After-school programs can often hook students on a physical activity and lead to other beneficial outcomes (Witt, 2001). The next logical step is to move beyond the provision of these services *after* school to their more holistic provision—offering them *during* the school day.

Educating the Whole Child

An old slogan states, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste," and a popular physical education poster adds, "So is the other 90 percent of the body." Perhaps the most exciting prospect in regard to the placement of park and recreation professionals in K-12 schools is the symbiotic potential that it holds for doing a better job of educating the whole child. The separation between mind and body that is so typical in modern K-12 school education can be repaired with the collaboration of professionals who understand and appreciate the mutually reinforcing qualities of a fully functioning mind and body. This is where physical educators make their mark (Hellison, 1985) and where park and recreation professionals can collaborate with physical educators to make their mark together.

Synergistic Possibilities

What is it exactly that we propose? We propose that K-12 schools hire park and recreation professionals as resource persons, similar to those they employ as reading specialists, speech and language pathologists, and social workers. Park and recreation professionals could serve as members of an interdisciplinary team dedicated to meeting the needs of the whole child. Part of their job could be to use the school's facility more efficiently during nonschool hours. However, park and recreation professionals have much more to offer, such as teaching, counseling, and leadership expertise. In addition, they have expertise with program planning, administration, and evaluation. Like social workers, they are in a good position to advise teachers about their students' lives outside of the classroom.

Florida's HEARTS Program

Consider the following example. In Miami's Dade County Public Schools, federal funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs makes it possible to train therapeutic recreation undergraduates to work with classroom teachers in order to better serve the

needs of children with disabilities. This program, Holistic Education for the Advancement of Recreation Therapy in the Schools (HEARTS), brings therapeutic recreation majors with a variety of backgrounds and languages into the public schools to work directly with children with disabilities. The trainees offer related services that are designed to further the educational goals of each child in Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), which are mandated by the state of Florida. They work together with classroom teachers, psychologists, social workers, and counselors in order to educate the whole child (Howard, 2001; McKenney, Camper, & Wolff, 2000).

The rationale for the HEARTS program is anchored in the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997). IDEA requires that all states and territories provide a free and appropriate public school education in the least restrictive environment to all youths between the ages of 3 and 21, regardless of their abilities (Lawson, Coyle, & Ashton-Shaeffer, 2001). To date, the HEARTS program has been very effective, and the future looks just as promising (McKenney & Ashton-Shaeffer, 2002). Since the program has prospered and delivered tangible benefits to the Miami Dade County Public School System, the possibility of placing therapeutic recreation professionals in the public schools on a permanent basis has grown.

Beyond Therapeutic Recreation

While the HEARTS program is an important example of therapeutic recreation's potential to contribute significantly to K-12 education, our proposal goes beyond targeting the special needs of children with disabilities. We look forward to a time when the HEARTS model is expanded to include a full spectrum of park and recreation professionals who work together with classroom teachers, physical educators, and other allied health professionals in order to better serve the needs of all the children.

We are unaware of any other program that illustrates what we are proposing. However, the potential contributions of park and recreation professionals to K-12 schooling are extensive. Traditional recreation activities (e.g., sports, art, music, crafts, drama, and games) provide students with an enjoyable means for learning new behaviors and social skills. According to Leming (1991), people begin to understand the self and the social world through recreation. It is the social nature of recreation that logically and psychologically relates to a person's character development. By supervising children before school, during recess, after school, on field trips, and in other school-related situations, park and recreation professionals could help foster a child's character development, sportsmanship, and sense of social responsibility (Sharpe, Brown, & Crider, 1995; Romance, Weiss, & Bockoven, 1986). Classroom teachers would certainly benefit from the cultivation of these characteristics in their students.

We envision a future in which park and recreation specialists arrive at school each morning along with their colleagues (i.e., physical educators, social workers, counselors, psychologists, and classroom teachers). Together they form an interdisciplinary team dedicated to educating the whole child. Each team member understands the mutually reinforcing aspects of the work they do, and they respect one another's professional contributions. Parochial interests, territoriality, or turf protection have long since yielded to the greater concern of doing whatever is necessary to offer children the best possible education.

Ideally, what we envision would require creating two full-time and one part-time position. One person would work during the regular school day; the second staff member would be scheduled for the late afternoon/evening shifts; and the third person (part-time) would work on the weekend. The salaries for these positions could be funded by the community, the schools, or a combination

of the two. While the cost might seem prohibitive, the money saved by not building separate recreation facilities and not staffing and maintaining them would result in substantial savings for the community. But to ensure this, a proactive school administrator and school board must take the initiative.

Conclusion

In 1916, educational philosopher John Dewey first championed the importance of recreation and leisure in the teaching/learning process (Dewey, 1966/1916). Twenty-two years later, the National Education Association incorporated leisure as one of its "Seven Cardinal Principles of Education." In more recent years, federal legislation such as IDEA reminds us that recreation and leisure programs are essential to a well-rounded K-12 education. To that end, welcoming park and recreation professionals into schools could add to the quality of the teaching and learning. We propose that K-12 schools do just that.

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