

A Worldwide Perspective of Sports in Education

By [Learning Curve](#) | Apr 24, 2020

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Although there is widespread agreement on the need for physical education and sports in almost all countries across the world, in reality there are tremendous disparities in how various countries actually implement sports and physical education programmes in schools. I have been fortunate to have lived in a number of countries - in addition to my native USA - and would like to share some of my observations as to how physical education is approached in a number of countries.

Before we can effectively evaluate how countries approach sports in education, a couple of distinctions need to be made. The first distinction is that between physical education as part of the school curriculum - which focuses on broad participation in a variety of physical activities - and the focus on competitive sports. The second distinction is between standards that are mandated by law and the actual reality of the implementation (and enforcement) of these laws at the ground level.

Let us look first at the United States, since it is the country that seems to be most emulated here in India. When I grew up, we had Physical Education (PE) at least thrice a week. While there was some structure to it, it consisted mostly of games like dodge ball and kickball with hardly any emphasis on skill development. It was consequently very obvious who the athletes were and who were not. No attempt was made to encourage those who were not athletic. They were simply made to feel like failures and so, they tried to do anything to avoid the dreaded "gym class". In fact, studies have shown that about half the people in the US say that their first memory of failure was in a physical education class!

Only one state in the US - Illinois - mandates daily physical education. Most other states only require two hours of physical education (PE) per week. However, whether this actually takes place is another story. Especially in the past decade, the emphasis in US education has been on "No Child Left Behind". The focus is thus completely on standardised test scores, and any subject that is not directly related to preparation for the test has been eliminated or ignored. Unfortunately, this includes physical education, which is the worst thing that could happen, especially with the unrelenting increase in childhood obesity in the US.

There are many innovations in PE that come from the US. Organisations like Spark have created age appropriate curricula for developing movement and athletic skills, in a fun and engaging format. Many schools have adopted the Health Club model of offering classes like kickboxing, aerobics, and boot camp classes similar to those offered in health clubs. Many PE classes are now required to include health and nutrition instruction. This is good for the overall understanding of health, but detracts from the amount of time that is spent in true physical activity.

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When it comes to organised competitive sports in schools, the US is undoubtedly the leader. They have well-structured competitive leagues in a wide variety of sports, and are very inclusive of females as well as males, something that is very rare in Asia. In fact, the law dictates that boys and girls must have equal opportunity and participation. Unfortunately, most of the focus is on competitive team sports and there is little emphasis on lifetime sports that help maintain lifelong fitness, such as running, cycling, and tennis. In addition, most of the participants at the school level cannot compete after they get to university, and thus, most of them completely give up their sport and lose their level of fitness in the pressure-filled focus on academics, dating, and drinking.

Australia is another country that places a tremendous emphasis on sports participation but can boast of very little structured physical education mandates. They have recently passed laws to re-introduce daily physical education in schools; however, the reality is that it is the sports teams that are looked up to for leadership - instead of the physical education staff! New Zealand has a similar lack of respect and training for physical education professionals, with the result that a majority of their sporting culture takes place outside the school environment.

The UK has recently become proactive in trying to create a sense of partnership between physical education in schools and the sporting activities of clubs and other organizations. They have invested in the Physical Education School Sport Club Links (PESSCL) programme, whose goal is to have every child between the ages of 5 and 16 years engage in four hours of sports per week. Two hours would be in

Physical Education classes, with the additional hours provided by a combination of school, community, and club resources. Not enough time has elapsed for the effectiveness of this programme to be studied; however, it appears to be an intelligent attempt for the schools to work together with other agencies, so as to increase the overall participation in sports. Whether this is geared to creating widespread participation in a variety of sporting activities, or it simply focuses on creating more opportunities for the superstar athletes to shine, is something that remains to be seen.



Singapore is one country where laws are certainly enforced, so adherence is not an issue there. They mandate two hours of PE every school week, except during examination seasons. They also have a compulsory fitness examination that is conducted in every school, once a year, to assess the levels of physical fitness of pupils. Not only are these scores used to grade their fitness, but those who score poorly are required to do an additional two months in the county's compulsory military service! As beneficial as this may sound, sport is not very well developed in Singapore due to the tremendous pressure for academics. They can afford the time for PE only because they have such long academic days, including full days on Saturday. This absolute focus on academics has stunted the ability of superior athletes to devote the time required to train at highest levels.

A country that is just the opposite in terms of size and focus on sports but shares a similar approach regarding government funding and mandates is China. Their outstanding results on the international sporting scene are primarily due to their government-funded talent identification and training process. If it is determined (usually at a very early age) that a child has a talent for a particular sport, that child is sent to national sports schools. Here, there is very little emphasis on academics, but they receive coaching and development training on a full-time basis. This can certainly help produce world champions in many sports, especially those that emphasize rote repetition such as gymnastics and diving. It is hard to say how many children get burnt out physically, mentally or both - in this process. This also creates a separation between the "athletes" and the "non-athletes".

However, even regular Chinese schools have mandated two hours of PE per week. They have created standardised tests, which are administered every two years, in order to judge overall fitness levels. The students must also achieve a certain level of proficiency in PE, in order to move to the next grade. They also place an emphasis on health knowledge and have a very structured programme for training PE teachers. Only about 30% of the PE teachers in secondary schools have the equivalent of a college degree, while most of them have an associate degree, the equivalent of two to three years in a specialised programme for physical education.

I see India currently being somewhere between China and Singapore. Like Singapore, the focus on academics creates a barrier for talented athletes to spend enough time training for their sport, so as to be able to compete on the world stage. Like China, India has a tremendous population pool on which to draw from. I would love to see India strive to find the perfect balance between this focus on sports and academics, as well as a broad-based development of love for physical activity, with dedication to developing champion athletes.

My personal approach would be to try to select the best practices from each of the other countries. From the US, I would love to see an emphasis on age-appropriate skill development in an atmosphere of fun and games, with an intent to create a love of sport at an early age. Having a standardised testing protocol like that in Singapore and China would be appropriate, but it should be focused on measuring one's own personal development over time, instead of comparing it with others. There should be a balance of a broad-based introduction to a variety of sports within a Physical Education context, while opportunities are provided for talented athletes (regardless of economic background) to have the financial support that will allow them to pursue a sport to school, state, national, and even the professional level.

It would be great to see educators and parents recognise the remarkable benefits of PE in developing a student's healthy habits over a lifetime, as well as the benefits of children choosing to train seriously for a sport that they are passionate about. The life skills that can be developed by one's dedication to pursue a dream of, say, becoming a tennis professional, can equip children to become successful in life, no matter which career they eventually pursue. It should not be considered a failure when one does not reach a professional level in sport, as the very pursuit of excellence would have developed a tremendous sense of discipline, time management, sportsmanship, the ability to take responsibility for results, and the trait of learning from defeats. They will most certainly emerge with a lifelong love of sport that will help them remain fit, healthy, and successful in all spheres of life, for an entire lifetime.

In my view, this should be our goal for all students in India: to realise that a healthy, active body will enhance their mental prowess and therefore, they should strive to maintain a healthy balance between body, mind and spirit.

Ted Murray has a 36 year career as one of the most innovative and versatile tennis coaches in the world. He has run programs at clubs, resorts, and academies in a number of countries while coaching players of all ages and ability levels, including Indian Grand Slam Winners Leander Paes and Olympic Medalist Gigi Fernandez.

Ted has had a long and successful relationship with Tennis in India. In 1985 he was selected as the first coach of the Britannia-Amritraj Tennis Foundation (BAT) and worked tirelessly with the Amritraj family to train the next generation of Davis Cup players for India. And after a short stint in the USA, Ted moved with wife Shikha to Bangalore in 2008 to start a very successful summer junior tennis and yoga camp.

Category: Teacher Development

Subject: Sports and Physical Education

Board: All boards

Grade/Standard: Early Childhood Education

Class 1-2

Class 3-5

Class 6-8

Class 9-10

Class 11-12

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