

## Making Assessment Meaningful in Physical Education

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If you want to know how well Brenda plays tennis, you have to watch her play tennis. This seemingly obvious assessment strategy wasn't quite so evident even less than a decade ago, say experts. Physical education learning standards, released in 1995, have required educators to identify what is truly important for students to learn, and then to consider how best to determine if students have acquired that knowledge.

Assessment in physical education has become more authentic, states Leslie Lambert, dean at Roanoke College in Salem, Va., where she also served as chair of the education and physical education department. In the past, she says, teachers would often evaluate a student's ability in physical activities through skill tests—by noting how many times Brenda could hit a tennis ball against a wall in a specific period of time, for example. Through such tests, a student demonstrates his ability to perform a skill in isolation. And although that ability “may correlate into game play,” notes Lambert, teachers today want to know “whether this person can actually play tennis with another human being.”

“Physical education teachers don't rely on skill tests much anymore,” agrees Mary Lou Veal, associate professor of exercise and sport science at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (see *Viewpoint*). Instead, teachers are learning how to observe movement in the context of game play. Rubrics, she adds, give teachers a tool for evaluating a student's performance in a range of physical activities—from tennis to volleyball, swimming to aerobic dance.

Teachers are also learning how to use assessment to help students set physical fitness- and sport-related goals, say experts. The teacher's role in this effort, says Lambert, is to help students make sense of the data they collect. Assessment data should help students strategize and solve problems, she maintains. Students must learn to ask, “If this is where I am now, and this is where I want to be, then what might my next strategies be to help me get there?”

### A Long-Term Focus

This approach to assessment makes it more meaningful to students, say experts. And when

assessment is more meaningful, adds Lambert, so too is physical education.

The physical education curriculum is now built around a “lifetime skills framework,” says Jerry Casciani, associate professor and chair of the physical education department at the State University of New York College at Cortland (SUNY Cortland). The emphasis, he explains, is on helping students reach a level of performance “that would allow them to enjoy long-term participation in the sport or activity.”

Building a lifetime interest in physical activity requires that teachers truly respond to students' interests. Teachers now ask for more input from their students when tailoring their lessons to fit specific learning needs, Lambert says. Students, she notes, are taking more initiative in developing their own “repertoire of skillfulness” in physical activities.

## **A More Inclusive Model**

Such individualization is extremely important in physical education today, Casciani states. As a result, teachers must be prepared to tailor instruction within a normal range and be able to adapt the program to “meet the needs of those students who have physical challenges.” This is not a new emphasis, he says, “but it now has a stronger focus.”

Tim Davis, assistant professor of physical education at SUNY Cortland, applauds the attention now paid to adapted physical education. Too many teachers, he believes, graduate without knowing how to include students with disabilities in the regular physical education classroom.

Davis points to a unique course at Cortland that seeks to enlighten physical educators about inclusion. Students enrolled in the physical education master's degree program can participate in weekend workshops that focus on inclusive outdoor education, adapted aquatics, and sports and games for children with disabilities. The college then hires adults with physical disabilities to kayak, camp, and so on, with the graduate students. “These individuals with disabilities serve as models,” and help show that students with disabilities can enjoy—and be successful in—sports and recreational activities, Davis states. Such a program, he maintains, helps remove the attitudinal barriers that keep physical educators from taking state standards and outcome measures and “relating them to children with disabilities.”

The move to more authentic assessment should make it easier for teachers to cope with the very real challenges posed by inclusion, Lambert observes. The physical education program can be tailored “to a great degree to match the individual strengths and needs of students,” she notes, and teachers “are incredibly able to find ways to individualize.” Now, Lambert asserts, more meaningful assessment will give teachers a tool to help all students, including those with disabilities, “see what their particular strengths are and in what areas they need to improve.”

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