

Staff Development: Fine and Fit

ANN MURRAY



Credit Diane Murray

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Picture a cloudy, somewhat damp Sunday morning. . . . the lobby of a suburban high school gymnasium full of noisy, nervous teachers, administrators, and students dressed in shorts or sweatpants—crowding around a race registration table. . . . staff developers giving out race numbers, tying up a “FINISH” sign, or filling water jugs.

How, you might ask, did a highly respectable educational collaborative, with a long history of providing “solid” professional inservice training and graduate level courses ever end up in the road race business?

The answer, not simple, has three parts. About three years ago stress management moved from seventh to first place on a list of staff development topics ranked by teachers and administrators in our schools. Morale hit rock bottom due to the effects of Proposition 2½. Perhaps most important, our staff at Merrimack Education Center (MEC), an educational collaborative serving 22 districts, included avid jogging and exercise enthusiasts.

During a fall 1981 meeting of the Inservice Commission, which consists of representatives from each of the 22 MEC member districts, “Let’s Plan Something That Gets Us Out of the Doldrums” surfaced as an idea and resulted in a mid-winter “Fitness for Educators Conference.” Mid-winter was chosen because the height of the cold season, especially in Massachusetts, is exactly when people need a lift in spirits.

To keep costs reasonable, yet offer an appealing meal and program, we used Nashoba Valley Technical High School, a modern facility whose culinary arts department agreed to prepare a gourmet buffet supper.

Participants were given a choice of a wide range of 14 workshops, with seven running concurrently in each of two sessions. The program emphasized relaxation and stress release as well as classroom programs and their applications. Sample topics were:

- Fitness through aerobic dancing
- Understanding and managing hyperactivity
- Fitness for life
- Controlling stress
- Holistic health: making your own wellness
- Facing the controversy of sex education in schools.

Program presenters included local medical personnel, physical education instructors, teachers who shared their leisure time interests, and staff members from projects and agencies related to aging, diet, and health.

The success of the program encouraged the MEC joggers, who were already planning the “First Annual MEC Challenge Road Race.”

By setting up the race for two courses, 2.8 miles and 6.2, planners hoped to encourage participants of varying abilities. The race was publicized at all 200 schools in our MEC area and in local newspapers. Application forms allowed runners to enter as individuals or on a school district team. Local businesses donated trophies and tee shirts, and the entire staff of MEC secretaries, bookkeepers, and program specialists showed up at 9 a.m. on a Sunday morning to handle registration and refreshments for the 190 participants. Another cadre of volunteers, mainly students, manned water stations, stopwatches, and start/finish lines.

From the first “Ready, on your mark,” to the final “The winner is . . .,” the mood was positive and enjoyable—a welcome break from heavy educational concerns. **EL**

Note: Readers wishing copies of the “Fitness for Educators Conference” brochure and MEC Challenge Road Race application may call or write Ann Murray, Merrimack Education Center, 101 Mill Road, Chelmsford, MA 01824 (617) 256-9225.

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