**4 Reasons Why We Must be Good Role Models**

-Teaching Virtues by Walking the Walk!-

Written by Catherine Himberg

The ideal outcome of physical education is a physically educated person, which includes being active and fit. I believe most physical educators, their university professors, and the public would agree with this statement, and it is expressed through the NASPE standards. The arguments start when the “how” questions are asked. *How* do we guide students in the process of becoming physically active and healthy for life? *How* do we help students develop the skills, knowledge and dispositions they need to enjoy physical activity now and when they exit our programs? *How* do we help students become physically educated people who have the skills, know the “stuff”, do participate regularly in physical activity, are physically fit, and value physical activity for its contributions to health, well-being, and enjoyment of life?

Hundreds of articles, books, presentations, and workshops, have answered these “HOWs” in different ways. In this editorial I present my point of view on one aspect of the “how” that I believe is crucial: being a positive role model by being physically active and fit according to health-related criteria. I present this view not only as an educator with some K-12 teaching experience, but also as a parent and advocate for quality physical education. I will end with a few ideas for how we can avoid making excuses and hold each other accountable for being physically active and fit teachers, teacher educators, and future teachers.

Being a positive role model means different things to different people, but for physical educators it must include modeling the virtues that are vital to developing and staying with a healthy, active lifestyle. Schools and teachers have a tougher job than ever helping students develop desirable human virtues because divorce and two working parents result in little time for the important details of raising children. Virtues such as honesty, integrity, commitment, diligence, dignity, enthusiasm, excellence, moderation, perseverance, reliability, respect, responsibility, self-control, sincerity, and truthfulness are not always being taught at home. Physical education is an ideal place to teach these virtues, and many of them are crucial pieces that help make up the physically-educated-person puzzle.

Before I go on, it might be a good idea that I admit to some of my biases:

* It is the *responsibility* of all teachers, regardless of the subject they teach, to be good role models for their students.
* There is NO excuse for being a physical educator who does not participate regularly in physical activity, sufficient for development of health-related fitness (modified, of course, for injuries and disabilities). Too many people focus on what they cannot do rather than what they can do. If my student who is a paraplegic can meet health-related fitness criteria and be a skilled wakeboarding athlete, I can get out and go for a brisk walk even if it rains. If my student who is morbidly obese can face this fact and start the journey toward lifelong activity and fitness, I can go to yoga when my back is tired. No excuses accepted!
* Being active and fit does not automatically make you a good teacher. I know fit and active physical education teachers that I would *not* want to teach my children. Likewise, I know overweight, inactive teachers who teach quality, standards-based physical education. If I *had* to choose, I would pick the latter over the fit and active drill sergeant-types for my children. Developmentally appropriate practices trump all, but why should we have to choose the lesser of two “evils”?
* I believe it is tougher for the “boot-camp” style fitness freak to become a teacher of quality physical education than it would be for the overweight and unfit physical education teacher, who is otherwise committed to quality physical education, to become active and fit.
* Fitness development is only one of six NASPE standards, and I do not believe it is the *one* to focus on in our classes if we want to help children become active for life. We are *not* personal trainers. We are educators. Our classes should be teaching students how to develop the self-management skills and supporting virtues that help them develop activity habits that last. We should build confidence in students’ abilities, and we should make sure physical education and activity are enjoyable, meaningful experiences. The hope is that lifelong physical activity habits that promote fitness will be the result. It’s a little like the “teaching the hungry *how* to fish instead of just feeding them fish” argument…
* Too many physical education professionals focus (for themselves) on one or two components of physical fitness and leave out the rest. The definition of health-related physical fitness includes cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength and endurance, flexibility and body composition. Physical education professionals should be able to find the specific age-related standards for themselves, and they should possess the knowledge to be able to modify these as needed if injuries or disabilities are present. They should be able to do this for each of the fitness components.

Now that you are aware of some of my biases you can read on with a smile, knowing that we come from the same “place”, or curiously dissect all that I have to say to formulate your argument against my point of view. As long as you read on and discuss this with at least one colleague, you will have made the hours I spent writing this editorial worthwhile.

So let me present to you my 4 reasons why physical education teachers must be active and fit:

* **Hypocrisy is not a virtue.**
* **Role-modeling is powerful.**
* **Image Problems Sabotage our Message.**
* **Respect is earned.**

Alright, so these are all related. But I’ll break them down one by one anyway. I apologize in advance if I sound preachy. I know that this will be read mostly by the “choir”, but I also know that even some of our “choir members” need to get their butts off the couch a little more often…

**Hypocrisy is not a virtue.** We don’t want to be seen as hypocrites. The NASPE standards communicate our “message” for quality physical education. Teaching units and lessons that address the NASPE standards ensures that the message is communicated to our students. The main message is: We want you to develop the skills, knowledge and dispositions needed to enjoy being active now and for the rest of your life. If we fail to communicate that we believe in and live according to our own message, we become hypocrites. And who do we think we are fooling? Students know if we are just “talking the talk” and it does *not* inspire them. Who are we to encourage our students to be active, give effort, and exercise outside of school if we don’t do it ourselves? If we don’t buy our own message, how can we sell it to our students? These questions are not just for the K-12 teachers, but also for the teacher education professors. Being too busy, the most popular excuse for all ages, is not a valid one for physical education teachers or professors. As we teach our students time management, a self-management skill crucial in developing lifelong physical activity habits, we must be able to model good time management, and find time for physical activity in our own lives. Discussing our own barriers and obstacles, and how we problem-solve to get around them makes us positive role models.

**Role-modeling is powerful.** Research and common sense tells us that being a positive role model is important if we want to change behaviors. As you read this, NASPE members have just discussed and perhaps voted on the revised version of the position paper on “Physical Activity and Fitness Recommendations for Physical Activity Professionals” at the AAHPERD conference in Tampa, Florida. The 2002 version of this position paper was quite clear. My hope is that the 2009 version will state just as strongly that physical activity professionals are powerful role models, and as such they should be physically active and fit according to age appropriate health-related criteria. The paper summarizes the research on role-modeling in our field, and emphasizes how important this part of our charge is as physical educators.

The common sense side of this issue is easy to understand if you have ever talked to children about their teachers. My own children would be polite, but puzzled whenever they would come home from school and tell me about their overweight and unfit teachers (and coaches) who would have them run, do push-ups, etc. The teachers who earned my children’s respect were the ones that were good role models by “walking the walk”, not necessarily during class, but before or after. The kids who see you at the gym, jogging in the park, on the tennis court on the weekend, or playing in the hockey league at night, talk to their classmates…

Being a positive role model includes sharing with the students what you do to stay active and healthy. For teachers who carry a few extra pounds, this is especially important because it may not be so obvious. For the overweight teachers out there, your message can be quite powerful if you share your commitment to yourself and your health by becoming physically active enough to produce health-related fitness. I cannot imagine a more powerful role model than one who has had to go through some of the same struggles as those facing our students, and has succeeded in accomplishing short and long-term goals.

As a positive role model is also effective to discuss with your students that becoming physically active and fit is a lifelong journey. Teaching by example how this truly is a lifelong commitment becomes an important part of your curriculum. And this is where virtues such as integrity, commitment, diligence, dignity, honesty, enthusiasm, excellence, moderation, perseverance, reliability, respect, responsibility, reverence, self-control, sincerity, thankfulness, and truthfulness, find a natural home in physical education. Having students keep journals in which they reflect on these virtues in light of their own journey to become or stay physically active and fit is a fun and effective way to monitor their progress, thoughts, and learning.

**Image Problems Sabotage our Message**

If you ever watch movies or TV shows you probably join me in my cringing as our professionals are so often portrayed as either “fat and lazy” or “fit and cruel”. From the 80s with “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off” to the last few years’ “Mr. Woodcock” and ”Gym Teacher: The Movie” these are the typical images, only interrupted by the “fit and stupid” image (which, by the way, is reflected in personal trainer depictions as well, a recent example is brilliantly portrayed by Brad Pitt in “Burn After Reading”).

There is no time to lose. I frequently tell my students who are going to be physical education teachers that they carry a heavy burden. We know that we teach the most important subject there is. What good is a sound brain in a neglected body? But the image problem is hurting our profession, and it can only be solved by us: *All* of us. Not only do we have to promote the great things we do to provide quality physical education for our students, but we must also be great images ourselves by *being* physically active and *reaching* health-related fitness criteria! Our students can learn through our examples that fit and healthy bodies come in different shapes and sizes, and not all fit people make the cover of SELF or Men’s Health Magazine. Image is more than skin deep. A positive image of physical education and physical educators is created by our actions in the classroom as well as promoting an active lifestyle as we lead by example.

**Respect is earned!** If we are to be respected as a profession, we, the professionals must act professionally. That includes taking our national standards (NASPE) seriously enough that we ourselves meet them. This makes sense to the public as well. A few years ago, as a project in one of my graduate courses, we surveyed 500 parents about a variety of physical education related issues. When we asked the parents to indicate their agreement with the following statements: “Physical education teachers should be good role models by being physically active”, and “Physical education teachers should be good role models by being physically fit”, 95% and 94% respectively agreed!

I have had conversations with scores of fellow parents about the lack of self-respect demonstrated by inactive and unfit physical education teachers (and coaches). Respect is earned, and so is self-respect. In order to earn both, we have to “walk the walk”.

**So What? (or “practical implications”):**

What can we do about this problem of too much talking and too little walking?

If you read this, chances are good that you fall into one of the following categories: K-12 physical education teacher, physical education teacher education (PETE) professor, or future physical education teacher. Here are my ideas for what each of us can do to help make sure more of us “walk the walk”.

K-12 Physical Education Teachers (and Future Teachers)

* Find time in your life to be physically active. Consider it a key part of your very important job. When you carve out time for exercise, it is contributing positively to your teaching.
* Share with your students what you do to stay active and fit. If you don’t have the physique that makes you look like you are a regular at the gym or in the park, the students may not know that you are active and fit. Don’t keep your physical activity a secret!
* Projects that you give students should reflect the importance of physical activity. Include the virtues discussed earlier (integrity, honesty, diligence, etc.) in these assignments. Make sure they are meaningful and that they focus on self-management skills such as goal-setting and building confidence.
* Take the REAL Teacher’s Pledge on the CASPER’s website (supportREAL teachers.org). By committing publicly to being the best teacher you can be, including being a positive role model, it may help you hold yourself accountable. Here’s the link - http://www.csuchico.edu/casper/recognition/pledge.html

Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) Professors

* Find time in your life to be physically active. Consider it a key part of your very important job. I have heard PETE professors talk about their lack of time to exercise as they prepare their classes where the importance of physical activity is the central message. It just does not compute in the students’ minds… PETE professors must also be positive role models. I have met overweight and obese PETE professors who talk about the importance of physical activity as if it is an abstract concept. It is not, and the PETE students are bright enough to see right through us! If we don’t buy our own message, how can we sell it to them?
* Create projects for your students that emphasize virtues such as honesty, diligence, responsibility and integrity as they learn important skills and concepts related to physical activity and fitness promotion. A few years ago I started a personal activity/fitness project in my High School Curriculum course here at California State University, Chico. The project was inspired by the lack of physical fitness I saw in my students as they administered the Fitnessgram to each other in my assessment course. Not only did more than half of my students fall short in flexibility, the often-neglected stepchild of the fitness components, but many did not come close to meeting health related fitness criteria for muscular strength and/or endurance, cardiovascular endurance, or body composition. When I asked my students one-on-one about their physical activity levels, I discovered, as expected, that about half did not meet the recommendations for physical activity for adults. They were often former athletes who just did not know what to do once they were done with school sports. They had not learned the skills, concepts and dispositions needed to be active and fit adults. I decided to implement the personal fitness project to shine a light on this issue. And we are now in the process of expanding and implementing pieces of this personal activity and fitness project throughout our PETE major, focusing along the way on the self-management skills and the virtues so important in the journey of lifelong activity and fitness.
* Some PETE programs around the country will test their students’ fitness to determine whether they can continue in the program. Even though this is an option, I don’t believe it is the most effective. We are choosing to take a different route in our program. We do believe it is VERY important that physical education teachers are physically active and fit, but we do not want to close the door to someone who may be open to the message, who is inspired to become an excellent teacher, but who needs to change some personal habits to get there. Being active and staying active enough to meet health-related fitness criteria takes an internal commitment. Being motivated by having to pass an imposed test will probably not translate into intrinsic motivation that stays with you. And, just as with our K-12 students, the intrinsic motivation is what we are aiming for because it is the one that will last.

<Insert project about here (link)>

So, in conclusion: Let’s hold each other accountable! Let’s help each other develop active and healthy lifestyles, as we would help the students in our classes. Let’s make it the norm that we see exercise as an important part of being a physical education professional. Let’s be aware of the virtues that we model for our students when we are honest with each other and don’t accept excuses, when we help each other recognize when we do and don’t have integrity, when we stay committed and work diligently to stay on that path of lifelong activity and fitness, and when we show appreciation and thankfulness that we are able to use our bodies in ways that are joyful and bring health and wellness. Let’s respect ourselves and our fellow professionals enough to make sure we walk the walk, show self-control in our eating and activity habits, and express sincerity, responsibility and reverence in taking care of our bodies. And let’s strive for excellence in all of our professional endeavors, including being the role models our students deserve.

National Association for Sport and Physical Education. (2002). *Physical activity and*

*fitness recommendations for physical activity professionals* [Position paper]. Reston,

VA: Author.