



A message from the Council on Physical Education for Children (COPEC)

Promote Healthy and Active Lifestyles: Organize a Physical Education Summer Camp

by Steve Jefferies

As physical educators strive to motivate students to become more physically active, it is important for them to look beyond the time that students spend in physical education classes. One good measure of a successful physical education program is the “carry-over” of what is learned in class to the physical activities that children choose to do outside of class. It is particularly critical to examine what students do in their long summer break, when in the absence of alternative choices, inactivity can easily become a way of life.

Summer sport programs provide regular physical activity opportunities for athletically gifted children. Unfortunately, these programs tend to appeal only to children who enjoy competition and are already skilled in these particular team and individual sports. For the remainder—the majority of children—who either lack the skill, opportunity, or desire to participate in competitive sports, there are very few organized alternatives for them to be active, have fun, learn new skills, and spend time with like-minded peers in physical activity settings. A physical education camp is one solution for providing these children with physical activity opportunities.

Physical education teachers are uniquely qualified to offer summer programs that are focused on providing fun and building physical skills. Physical education teachers have access to school facilities and teaching equipment, and have a direct connection to the students who are most likely to attend such a camp. In addition, physical educators can identify those at-risk students who are most in need of physical activity, and can promote the physical education camp to the parents of these students.

Initial Camp Planning

The first steps in planning a physical education camp are to reserve a site and schedule the dates and time for the camp. Schools and recreational facilities are often used heavily by sport camps in the summer and therefore must be scheduled early. Physical education teachers who elect to use their own school facilities typically are given scheduling priority with their district administrators. Sometimes additional, out-of-school facilities are

desirable (e.g., fields, swimming pools, bowling alleys, etc.), and early scheduling is also advised for such facilities.

When picking dates for a camp, make sure to avoid national holidays and popular vacation times (e.g., fourth of July) and check for conflicting local events. If possible, avoid scheduling the camp during the same week as sport camps that are offered for children of the same age. Also consider whether the camp will be offered soon after the school year ends or if it will be scheduled several weeks later. June and July are the best months to offer a camp because in August families often go on vacation and facilities are being prepared for the new school year.

When possible, schedule camp times to accommodate family work schedules. It can be frustrating for parents when camps begin mid-morning and end mid-afternoon because this might require them to leave work or adjust their workday. Another frustration for parents is camps that only run for three or four days because they might need to make special day care arrangements for the remaining days in the week. It is much better to run a full-week camp so that participants have enough time to really embrace a daily regimen of physical activity.

Camp Staff

Running a quality physical education camp requires recruiting for a top quality staff. While many summer programs recruit only high school or college students, another option is to invite teaching colleagues from other schools in your district. If you do decide to hire college students, consider partnering with a teacher preparation program from a local college or university. Partnering with a local college or university program is an attractive option because it solves the camp staffing challenge and also gives future physical educators valuable practical teaching experience.

Camp Budget

A physical education summer camp is not a charitable event. Rather, it is an opportunity for teachers to supplement their summer



income in exchange for providing professional teaching skills. In addition to the costs of paying camp staff, there are many other costs to consider. When planning the budget, discuss all of the costs that your camp will accrue. The following is a list of likely expenses:

- Facility rental fee (including any cleaning costs)
- Equipment purchases (and possible replacement costs if the school equipment is used and damaged)
- Brochures, mailings, and promotional activities
- Transportation costs (if any)
- Camp t-shirts
- Camp photographs or certificates
- Food costs (meals, snacks, and any special events)
- Insurance (if needed)
- Staff salaries

It is helpful to calculate these fixed expenses per camper. Once you have determined the minimum cost for hosting the camp, you can decide the fee that you will need to charge. Before doing this, however, decide on your desired ratio of staff to students. One of the benefits of selecting staff with strong teaching and management skills is that fewer staff members are needed. A ratio of one instructor for 20 students is acceptable when qualified adult instructors are available. However, remember that you do need at least one spare staff member who can step in to teach if one of your instructors is absent.

If your school district recognizes the value of the camp for its students and is willing to provide some free items, such as use of

the school gymnasium and fields, it is possible to offer a camp at a very reasonable cost, while still paying your staff a fair salary. To keep fees low and to allow all students the opportunity to attend your camp, ask if your school has access to funds that can help with camp registration. At-risk students may be eligible to receive national or state financial assistance. In addition, local service groups, churches, and youth organizations may have programs to support children with financial needs.

Camp Promotion and Registration

The greatest challenge that all camps face is promotion. While it is difficult and expensive for out-of-town camps to make direct contact with potential participants, this is not the case with physical education camps that are offered by school district staff. Physical education teachers have easy access to the very students who are most likely to participate in a physical education camp. Furthermore, it is easy to ask colleagues in nearby schools to publicize your camp.

Brochures, flyers, and notes that are sent home with students are all effective and relatively inexpensive ways to promote your camp. Look for ways to add camp materials to scheduled school mailings. Remember that many parents think about scheduling their child's summer activities in the late winter or early spring. While announcements and reminders can continue all year, it is wise to get registration materials distributed to families at the beginning of the spring quarter (at the latest). During the spring, your students will need regular reminders about the camp. This is the time to ensure that families are aware of the program and know how to register their child.



If your school is willing to sponsor your camp, it may be possible to have camper registration coordinated through the school office. This is the best option because not only will this eliminate your responsibility for dealing with forms and money, it also means that as a school-sponsored event, you most likely do not need to be concerned about liability. If your school is not willing to coordinate camper registration, you should create a special camp bank account. Remember that you will need good financial records for taxes. It is also a good idea to consult with your tax advisor about the best way to make payments for goods and services in order to avoid problems when submitting your personal tax return in April.

Instructional Groups and Activities

Depending on the size of your registration, you should plan to organize students into groups that are based on grade level. Combining grade levels (e.g., 1-2, 3-4) works well as long as the students' abilities are similar. Organize students according to the grade level that they will be entering into in the fall. Also think carefully about whether or not to include students who are entering kindergarten because a whole day of camp might be too long for them. In addition, if you are an elementary physical education teacher, you might want to include your graduating fifth-grade students.

A physical education summer camp is an opportunity to extend your regular physical education program. A camp provides an opportunity to review familiar age-appropriate activities and introduce students to new activities that they might like to continue. If transportation issues can be resolved, consider transporting students off-site and using local resources. Familiarizing students with swimming pools, parks, bowling alleys, and tennis courts that they can use when camp is over is one more way to encourage students to stay active.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of a physical education camp that is led by trained physical educators is a focus on instruction. Such a camp should not just be a day-care program in which children stay busy playing games, but should instead provide quality learning experiences. There is no reason why learning and improving one's physical skills cannot be fun. One of your camp goals should be to help children understand that activities are more fun when played skillfully, and perhaps more importantly, that with practice, everyone can become more skillful.

If you have several groups, it is important to develop an activity schedule and instructional plan for each group before the camp. If you divide the day into instructional periods and assign your instructors to specific areas, you will avoid facility and equipment conflicts. With younger students (grades 1-4), 30-minute activity rotations work well. Slightly longer (45-minute) sessions work well for students in fifth grade and above.

Before camp begins, create an outline of appropriate instructional activities. Even experienced instructors will appreciate teaching suggestions, and an instructional plan will keep your staff focused on program goals. In a one-week camp, you should teach some activities daily and repeat most activities at least once to see any skill improvement.

Camp Administration

In addition to group instructors, physical education camps need at least one adult supervisor who is prepared to handle medical emergencies. Student health forms with contact and insurance information must be readily accessible by all camp staff in the event of a medical emergency. Although camp staff can handle minor first aid needs, the camp administrator should be responsible for contacting parents if medical attention is required. Staff members who take students off-site must also carry cell phones and a list of emergency phone numbers.

Procedures for addressing medical and other emergencies as well as the instructional program expectations should be clarified in a pre-camp staff meeting. The physical education camp director should create and distribute a staff handbook. Well-run physical education camps have clearly defined protocols that all instructors follow. This is especially important for the first day of registration. Plan carefully, and then discuss with your staff exactly what should occur on the first day. This is the time that parents will get their first impression of the people who will be watching over their children. Parents should feel comfortable that their children are in good hands through this interaction. In addition, decide how to respond to parents who want to drop in during the day. Most importantly, make sure that your staff knows the protocol for ending the day and returning students to parents. Allowing students to wander off from the camp without supervision must be avoided.

On the last day of your camp consider organizing a "family activity afternoon," with activities organized for campers and their family. Use this time to showcase selected student groups, activities, and skills. Families will enjoy spending time learning and participating in selected activities that illustrate what students have learned during the camp. If you have several different activity areas you can create a timed rotation so that all instructional groups have a chance to use your equipment and experience a variety of movement activities.

Most sport camps culminate with the presentation of awards. Unfortunately, recipients of these awards tend to be the campers who were already the most skilled when they arrived at camp. Physical education camps should be different. Your goal should be to have campers leave with good memories of the week and increased skills and motivation to continue being active throughout the summer. Emphasizing and rewarding individual ability differences is counterproductive to these goals. Instead, host a short presentation of camp participation certificates that are accompanied by a group photograph. The best legacy a physical education summer camp can leave is to instill in its participants a renewed joy for physical activity and a desire to stay healthy and active.

Steve Jefferies created Central Washington University's Physical Education Summer Camp (PESC). Now in its 17th year, PESC attracts students throughout Washington State and the Pacific Northwest. Contact Steve Jefferies at jefferis@cwu.edu if you have questions about running your own physical education summer camp.