Presenting to Your School Board

Presenting to your school board is preventive medicine that can help keep your physical education program healthy and safe during tough economic times. School board meetings are public venues where a wide range of decision makers and community stakeholders are present; this makes for a wonderful place to apply a dose of preventive medicine.

Determining when you will present to the school board will be crucial in how effective your advocacy is and whether it is truly preventive medicine. An analogy with martial arts will best demonstrate this. In martial arts, a good defensive strategy is to preempt your opponent's attack by landing a well-placed punch or kick before they can initiate their attack. If you know what your opponent is going to do next, then hit them before they can get their attack started. This offensive–defensive strategy is the gold standard of martial arts, and after being on the receiving end of a couple of well-timed offensive–defensive moves, your opponent is afraid to even try and hit you. In physical education advocacy, an offensive–defensive strategy is what you do when times are good to ensure that your district will not even consider actions that could negatively impact or marginalize your program during tough economic times. This means the time to advocate with your school board is not when there is trouble, but when things are going well and you have a positive story to tell. It is very hard to change harmful decisions once they have been made, and advocacy that starts at this point amounts to shoring up the levy after the flood. You may feel good about your valiant effort and
the justice of your fight, but you will probably lose. So if you are comfortable with the standing of your program in your district and you do not fear program cuts, then now is a perfect time to apply some preventive medicine and present to your school board. If your program is in danger, then you do not have a moment to lose—you need to start the advocacy process immediately.

When planning a school board presentation, we not only want to deliver a timely punch, but a punch that carries some weight. Objective statistics on how your program is improving kids physically and mentally is a punch that cannot be ignored. It is one thing to tell someone that childhood obesity is a national problem and exercise is part of the solution. But would it not have much more impact if you could show actual statistics that there are fewer overweight kids in your program this year than there were last year? Your school board members may be mildly interested in national statistics, but they will be deeply engrossed in statistics regarding the children in their district and these kinds of statistics make a great starting point for your school board presentation.

I always start my school board presentations with a review of the past year’s fitness testing results. This guarantees that I have the board members’ and the audience’s full attention. Often, I will preface it with a question such as, “Can public education have an impact on the health and fitness of students?” The statistics to follow will answer that question in the affirmative. The following are some of the ways in which I use my fitness results at Lakewood Middle School when presenting to the school board:

- Compare fall to spring data to highlight the improvements that are a result of our physical education program.
- Compare spring to fall results to highlight the decrease in fitness that happens to students during the summer when they are not in our physical education program.
- Link fitness to academics by comparing grade point average (GPA) and the number of fitness tests passed. Kids who pass all fitness tests on average rank at the top for GPA and kids who pass few or no fitness tests rank at the bottom for GPA.
- Link fitness to academics by looking at the percentage of students who have at least one “F.” I have found that 51% of the kids who can only pass one or no fitness tests have at least one “F.” Among the kids who can pass all fitness tests, only 17% have at least one “F.”

You can also use fitness statistics to highlight problems that the board and district administration can help you solve, as well as problems you are solving on your own. Only half as many sixth graders at my school can pass all five of our fitness tests compared with eighth graders. Physical education in our elementary schools is only once a week for 30 minutes compared with every other day for 50 minutes at the middle school. We are constantly playing catch up with our sixth graders, and this makes a good case for the district to increase elementary physical education time.

While statistics, what they mean, and how they drive your program make up the bulk of the presentation, a school board meeting is also a good time for some general education and for putting a human face on your program. Two years ago, for dramatic impact, I quickly showed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention obesity map slides from 1985 to 2010. This was new material for all of the board members and the audience. I also exposed the board to the results of our year-end survey of what students value in our physical education program. The board was impressed that fitness testing always makes the top five as do other nontraditional activities such as social dance and self-defense. We put a human face on our program by including anonymous student statements about their experiences in physical education as part of the supporting documentation I leave with the board. We also include individual fitness and academic results of students who have made great strides in their health and fitness as well as general physical education advocacy materials.

The overall impression you want to leave the school board with is that your physical education program is a valuable and indispensable program that produces proven results in the health, fitness, and academic performance of your students. That impression is the preventive medicine that will protect your program.

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