

## How did they do that? Systems Change and Physical Education in a School District

We know her as “the energizer bunny.” Heather Deckard has been a tireless champion for physical wellness for most of her 12 year career with the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD), where she currently serves as the Physical Education Coordinator. A physical education teacher for 12 years in this urban school district with 47,000 students, Mrs. Deckard has been leading the charge to revive and standardize physical education programming on the ground and among her peers, with the support of District leadership and The California Endowment. As a result of “the stars lining up” SCUSD has embarked on a systems level change that has elevated the importance of student physical education as a pillar of a complete educational experience and curriculum.

The changes described below represent the culmination of both human and financial resources, as well as a timely combination of the following key factors: (1) Heather’s indefatigable approach to insuring quality physical education for SCUSD students; (2) alignment with the goals and priorities of new district leadership; and (3) strategic identification of existing and new resources, both in-kind and financial, to implement wholesale change.

- Creation of a fulltime Physical Education Coordinator position (expanded from part-time plus PE teacher);
- Advocacy for professional development standards among physical education faculty;
- Identification of an evidence-based physical education (PE) curriculum;
- Mobilization of PE teachers to participate actively in curriculum selection, standards implementation;
- Identification of other champions among District leadership, including Superintendent, one or more school Principals, and school board members;
- Development of a 5 year plan in accordance with assistance from the California Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 2005 California Physical Education Model Content Standards for California Public Schools, and with support from the California Department of Education;
- Strategic and opportunistic networking to garner support from existing and newly identified partners and stakeholders, including both in-kind and funding resources;
- Presentations to “connect the dots” between physical education and academic performance for a variety of audiences;
- Training, training, and more training, both among PE and other faculty; and
- Integration of the Student Wellness Policy into District level policy, representing school board buy-in (approved 9/6/12).

As a result, schools are implementing an approved PE curriculum with a cadre of trained PE teachers, introducing “Family Fitness Nights,” administering the FITNESSGRAM assessment for physical fitness, are updating equipment and hardscape on selected campuses, and working toward achievement of higher standards for PE activity for elementary, middle, and high school (e.g., minimum standards in minutes of PE over 10 days) as promoted by CDE. *After one year, the District reported that the rate of schools in compliance with new PE standards had increased from 3% to 41%!!!*

During the summer of 2012, I interviewed Mrs. Deckard as part of the evaluation of the South Sacramento Building Healthy Communities HUB. Based on that interview and her reflections since, we present the recipe for systems change for physical education programming.

### **Steps to Creating Systemic Change in Physical Education in the SCUSD**

1. Start with a Champion in the District!
2. Mobilize “like minded” people to advance physical education. Work with the curriculum department, the teachers’ union, PE teachers, and others in committees as needed.
3. Identify and adopt existing standards for physical education for students, in the context of a 3-5 year planning process. Build a training plan around these standards, and solicit support from the California Department of Education.
4. Create an identity for the planning and implementation committee, with both a name and a memorable acronym, to facilitate communication about its work and elevate its stature amid other working committees.
5. Seek financial and in-kind resources from both traditional and non-traditional sources. SCUSD received a one-time block grant for Physical Education, Music and Arts to pay for equipment, supplies, and professional development. SCUSD retained 25% of the grant funding to support District wide implementation of the 3-5 year plan.
6. Search for and adopt a comprehensive, research –based k-12 curriculum to establish standards and training, in a uniform approach throughout the District schools (paid for with block-grant). A committee of PE teachers and a principal spent up to 3 years looking for the curriculum that SCUSD has adopted.
7. Reach out to high level District leadership to enlist support and authority to proceed with the plan. The new Superintendent for SCUSD (in 2009) was bringing a health focus to his reform agenda. Shamelessly show off site-specific activities and promotional events.
8. Commit to ongoing professional development for PE teachers, continuously and over time. Take full advantage of outside training opportunities to enhance the adopted curriculum and to demonstrate the commitment to and reinforce the importance of physical education.
9. Create a position at the District level to model the standards; to solicit and engage new partners; to develop and showcase highly visible events and activities; to develop and sustain presentations both within and outside the District; and to raise awareness about the importance of physical education and District and school-site level changes.
10. Give the champion a title worthy of this endeavor! People respond to the title and it reinforces that physical education is a priority for the District.

In closing, it is critical to recap key elements of this early success story: a champion for change; a commitment to high standards; ongoing professional development; and support from leadership and funders. The California Endowment provided funding for two years to support the fulltime position, to accelerate and enhance the changes that were underway. This funding complements other BHC initiatives that are advancing healthy behaviors at BHC school sites, and beyond.

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