

Grant funding, mill levy spur district's PE improvement

One-on-One is a feature designed to introduce you to your colleagues. This month, we speak to Eric Larson, physical education coordinator for Denver Public Schools. The American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance honored Larson as the Channing Mann Physical Educator of the Year. Following are edited excerpts from our conversation.

Q: *What would you identify as your biggest job challenge?*

A: The biggest challenge is making sure that we have enough physical education time for all of our students. We've had budget cutbacks over the last 12 years, but recently, we passed a mill levy for physical education in Denver Public Schools, so that is helping us overcome that challenge. We passed a mill levy in November 2012 and have also received grant funding. That's given a boost to our program.

Q: *What advice do you have for peers regarding grant funding opportunities?*

A: You have to be persistent. When we received our elementary Carol M. White Physical Education Program grant, it took us three times to rewrite the grant. We were able to receive the grant in 2009, but we started the process in 2006.

Q: *How has SPARK increased physical activity among students?*

A: The SPARK program has helped because it's an activity-based curriculum. Through the grants we've received, we implemented the SPARK program from early childhood through 12th grade. Last year, the Health Disparities Grant Program in Colorado allowed us to conduct workshops for high school teachers and implement the SPARK curriculum for high school students. The continuum has been completed for all of our students. The SPARK program is set up with lessons that emphasize movement. For example, if it's a soccer unit, everybody starts out with a soccer ball with individual drills and then progresses to 2-on-2 and 3-on-3 drills. It's set up so students get more touches of the ball, so they're more involved. It's small-group games instead of large-group games.

Q: *What advice do you have for peers interested in the SPARK program?*

A: If you're going to set up the program, you should also include the SPARK folio. That gives you resource materials and assessments. A lot of the materials can be posted and put on traffic cones in both English and Spanish. I would suggest that if you're going to purchase the SPARK manuals, you should also purchase the folios.

Q: *How did the fitness centers in the district come about?*

A: We call them "sound body, sound mind" fitness centers. Throughout the school day, students use the centers as part of their physical education class. After school, they're open to students, district employees, and community members. We staff the centers with PE teachers when school is in session. Certified personal trainers provide staffing after the school day.

Q: *What impact have PE exemptions had on physical education programs?*

A: I think it's had a major impact. There are states that allow students who participate in varsity athletics and other extracurriculars to have an exemption for PE. It makes an impact because students are missing out on standards-based PE. The challenge for coordinators is that we'd like to see all students take PE during their high school years. Now you have a waiver process where students can meet the PE requirement without taking PE courses. It would be great if there was a national mandate where exemptions would not be allowed.

Q: *What are some of the challenges associated with online PE?*

A: In online PE, you don't have the personal contact with students. There may be contact at the start and end of the course through fitness testing, but otherwise, everything is online. As such, it's a little harder to monitor student progress in an online course because you don't have as much face-to-face contact.

Q: *What does the Channing Mann Physical Educator of the Year Award mean to you?*

A: It means that Denver Public Schools has moved PE to the forefront. The honor is a reflection of that. We've received several grants for our PE program, and we received a \$6 million mill levy that Denver voters approved. That's given a boost to our program. Through the grants, I've been able to add additional staff members to our office. The award is a reflection of our team effort.

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