

Mitchell's Musings 2-9-14: Sounds Good But...

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There has been much concern in the last few years about an obesity epidemic among young, school-age children. Of course, there is concern also about obesity in adults, but the worry about children is that they will be unable to break bad habits that lead to obesity if not corrected early.

I recently came across an article about a California court settlement that is said to ensure that elementary school children in the state receive the amount of physical education (PE) required by state law. The article begins:

As schools tout the importance of exercise in an era of childhood obesity, a California parent and his lawyer have agreed to a settlement with dozens of districts across California that will force elementary schools to prove they are providing at least the minimum amount of physical education required by state law...¹

Sounds good, right? Kids will exercise and lose weight. The article goes on to say that because school teachers are nowadays especially concerned about how their students do on standardized academic tests, they may neglect to provide the requisite number of minutes of PE. So there appear to be two premises at the basis of the lawsuit. 1) PE time will address the obesity issue. 2) Teachers are overemphasizing academics due to testing and thus underemphasizing PE.

Despite the feel good nature of the reported litigation result, it set me to wondering. Is it possible that teachers' priority – whether caused in part by testing or not – might be correct? After all, it is possible for children to have physical activity outside of the school setting. Of course, it is also possible to have outside intellectual activity. But I suspect that schools have a greater advantage in academics than in PE. One of the premises of international trade theory is that what matters in exchange is *relative* advantage. On that basis, even if schools have better

¹<http://edsources.org/2015/lawsuit-agreement-to-force-schools-to-provide-physical-education/73544#.VM-OLMYfku0>

facilities for both academics and PE than parents, given the limited resources (essentially time and money available), in a constrained environment it may be better to favor academics at school and PE at home.

You may not be impressed with that argument. Too abstract! Too many yes, buts! But how about this one? At the UCLA Luskin School of Public Policy (where I teach part time after retirement), MPP (Master of Public Policy) students are required to do team projects in their second year which mainly involve consulting with an agency or nonprofit. One such team did a study for the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, an agency which was interested in encouraging PE in local schools as a way to address obesity.

The team's report was condensed and edited into a chapter for an annual volume I edit for the School entitled *California Policy Options*. You can find the chapter online in the 2014 edition (chapter 5).² Its findings are essentially that the schools the team looked at generally *did* meet state requirements for PE time (or came close). More importantly, the team reviewed the literature and spoke to nutrition experts. It appears that the number of calories that children can realistically burn off with PE is small. If you want to address obesity, the emphasis should be on diet.

There was also some concern that obese children – because their obesity hinders their ability to undertake PE exercises – become embarrassed and discouraged. In short, there could be an inadvertent and negative consequence of a focus on the quantity of PE minutes. So if PE is to be encouraged in schools, the focus shouldn't be on obesity which is not well addressed by state-mandated minutes of instruction. What matters – not so much for obesity but instead for other health reasons – is creating quality PE programs in which obese children can participate with success. Even if they don't lose weight, they will be better off with exercise – if it is tailored to their needs and not just defined in requisite minutes.

What's the bottom line here? In recent years, there has been much rhetoric about evidence-based public policy. It's unlikely that requirements for state-mandated PE minutes were

²<http://issuu.com/uclapubaffairs/docs/californiapolicyoptions2014> [pp. 119-131]

developed on the basis of careful studies of what might be best, particularly in the context of obesity. Of course, it is hard to argue that schools should be free simply to ignore legal requirements. And, as noted above, the court decision surely sounds good, particularly if you don't have much information about calories burned by PE. However, if I rephrased the question as one of the efficacy of setting curriculum standards via court decisions, the outcome doesn't sound quite so good.