

Running Head: ACTIVE SCHOOLS

The MOVEMENT Towards Active Schools

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James Mandigo is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Physical Education and Kinesiology at Brock University. He has also served as a consultant for OPHEA's Active Schools Awards Program and was the first Ever Active Schools co-ordinator in Alberta.

### Abstract

The concept of Active Schools has received national and international attention over the past decade. Programs throughout the world have now been implemented with the goal of getting more people active within the school community. This article summarizes some of these programs and examines the building blocks that are common among these programs. Examples of each building block are also provided to provide teachers and schools with ideas of how they can build their own active school.

### The MOVEMENT Towards Active Schools

On the eve of January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2000, people from all across the world celebrated the arrival of the new millennium. However, with this arrival came alarming reports that many of our children and youth are at risk of many health problems due to their inactivity. For example, the World Health Organization (2000) reported that less than 1/3 of young people from industrialized and developing nations are sufficiently active to benefit their present and future health and well-being. This global concern is no more evident than it is in our own empty backyards, playgrounds, and gymnasiums. Over half of Canadian children and youth aged 5 to 17 are not active enough for optimal growth and development with girls being less active than boys (Cragg, Cameron, Craig, & Russell, 1999). We have also seen significant decreases in school physical education (PE), especially for girls, once students are given a choice of whether or not they wish to take PE. (Luepker, 1999; Spence, Mandigo, Poon, & Mummery, 2001). These concerns about children's inactivity are not limited to Canada. In China, 18% of youth are sedentary with girls less active than boys (Hui, Chan, Wong, Ha, & Hong, 2001). As well, more than 35% of American high school students do not participate in vigorous physical activity and only 49% are enrolled in a physical education class (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, & U.S. Department Education, 2000). As a result, the time has now come to try and reverse these trends and the school setting has been identified as having the most promising impact on public health (Sallis et al., 1992; World Health Organization, 2000).

One of the ways that many countries are starting to address the problem of inactivity is through active school initiatives. An active school is a comprehensive approach of promoting physical activity. It makes physical activity participation among members of its school community a priority and provides opportunities for all to be included by ensuring that the whole

environment is conducive to safe and inclusive programs (Cale, 1997). The school community not only includes students and teachers, but also family members, corporate members (e.g., local businesses), school staff (e.g., custodial, administrative), local, provincial, and national government officials, and other individuals within the community who are involved in school-based initiatives (e.g., local health units, college and universities). Each member of the school community has a shared responsibility to ensure that teachers and students are supported and encouraged to live a healthy, active lifestyle (World Health Organization, 2000). Although this should be an intrinsic desire, significant health-care costs will result if sedentary individuals remain unconvinced (Katzmarzyk, Glendhill, & Shephard, 2000). The purpose of this article is to highlight what some countries are doing around the world to combat physical inactivity through active school initiatives and to provide common elements among such programs to encourage schools in Canada and across the world to adopt similar practices.

#### *Active School Projects Around the Globe*

The concept of active schools is one that spans the globe. The World Health Organization (2000) has identified physical activity within schools as a vital component of improving children's health across all nations. As well, the recent President's Report on Physical Activity (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, & U.S. Department of Education, 2000) identified the importance of taking a comprehensive approach such as including families, physical education programs, after school programs, youth sport and recreation programs, community events, and media campaigns to increase children's physical activity participation. Although the following list of national and international active school initiatives is in no way exhaustive, it does provide a snapshot of how many countries have used this comprehensive

approach to meet the challenge of improving children's health through physical activity participation.

*Canada.* Two Canadian provinces have recently implemented active school programs. In Alberta, the Ever Active program ([www.everactive.org](http://www.everactive.org)) has completed its first pilot year in 55 schools across the province (Schwartz, 2000). The Ever Active program builds upon Alberta's new Physical Education Curriculum (Alberta Learning, 2000) by providing resources, assessment tools, tracking mechanisms, and strategies for schools to: a) ensure a quality physical *education* program is being delivered; b) encourage and support active living initiatives *everywhere* in the school community; c) provide opportunities for *everyone* to take part in physical activity outside of regularly scheduled classes; and, d) create an *environment* that supports and encourages active living initiatives. Schools assess their current programs and develop an inclusive and comprehensive plan that is aimed at increasing physical activity participation among members of the school community. Schools who submit their plan then receive resources to help them implement initiatives across all four areas and to develop other ideas for Ever Active activities.

In Ontario, the Active Schools Program (can access through the Projects Link under [www.ophea.net](http://www.ophea.net)) was developed by the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association (OPHEA) and is designed to help school communities adopt, implement, and maintain physical activity programs throughout the entire school day. The program is progressive and schools can move through the program at their own pace. To do so, schools plan, track, and complete initiatives under the ACTIVE acronym:

**A** - Active Participation (e.g., active transportation to school)

**C** - Co-curricular (e.g., sports teams, intramural)

**T** - Teamwork (e.g., involve the entire school)

**I** - Involvement (e.g., include broader community resources, facilities and personnel)

**V** - Values (e.g., communicate to school /students about importance of regular activity)

**E** - Education (e.g., students have opportunity to participate in instructional activity)

Like Ever Active, members of the Active Schools Program receive resources to help them implement activities under the ACTIVE acronym. Once a school has completed an initiative under each letter, they receive a level one award and can then move on to subsequent levels (up to 6). School initiatives are then entered into a database of ideas under each letter that can then be shared with member schools.

*Australia.* In Australia, 20% of schools are involved in the Australian Council for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation's (ACHPER) national Active Australia Schools Network initiative ([www.activeaustralia.org/school/](http://www.activeaustralia.org/school/)). This initiative focuses on encouraging children to become more active and improving the places where sport and physical activity occur. Schools complete a membership form and register their intent to complete a planning proforma detailing their current situation, priority actions, and support needed to implement initiatives in three areas: a) curriculum, teaching and learning; b) school environment and ethos; and, c) school community links. To help implement their plan, schools receive a membership kit that contains resources to implement, motivate, and promote their physical activity programs. State co-ordinators also work closely with each school member in their state to provide direct links with community organizations and resources that are available to help them implement the priority actions they identified in their school plan. Members also receive a newsletter highlighting success stories from other member schools. Members of the Active Schools

Network are currently evaluating the impact that their active school initiatives have had in their schools.

*England.* Sport England has developed a comprehensive program called Active Schools ([www.sportengland.org/active\\_schools/index.htm](http://www.sportengland.org/active_schools/index.htm)) that takes a whole-school approach by linking schools and communities together to combat physical inactivity. This program provides schools with support, training, and resources so that every child has an opportunity to take part in physical activity and sport. The ultimate goal is to provide schools with a wide range of resources and initiatives so that every child is physically active for at least two hours per week within and outside the national curriculum. When schools register for the program, they receive a free resource package that helps them implement physical activity initiatives. Schools can also access an Active Schools help-line to answer questions or provide support about Active School initiatives. Schools that register for the program can apply for a financial award that recognizes their outstanding physical activity programs. In addition, Active Schools encourages the entire school community to become involved by providing a physical education awareness course for community volunteers (e.g., coaches, parents) who assist with physical education lessons or out-of-school-hours sporting activities. It also provides schools with information on how to access and screen community volunteers to ensure their students receive a safe and quality physical activity experience. Sport England has also created a coaching-training program to encourage more teachers to become coaches within their schools and within their communities.

#### *The Building Blocks of an Active School*

Despite the fact that active schools is a global phenomena and has been developed to meet local and national needs, there are many similarities between programs. After reviewing position statements and published promising practices (e.g., Rogers & Hampbel, 2000; Schwartz,

2002; Stephen, 2002), four key elements that are the building blocks of active school initiatives are presented in Figure 1 and identified in the following discussion. Table 1 provides examples of promising practices that have been reported and potential initiatives under each of these building blocks to assist schools to MOVE towards being an active school.

*Maximize resources.* One of the key elements that schools can do to build an active school is to evaluate existing resources and maximize the potential of these resources to promote physical activity among members of the school community. For example, programs such as those in Alberta and Australia have a committee of people from the school community identify strengths and areas of improvement. Based on this assessment, the committee sets out an action plan that will maximize the strengths of the school and seek to improve weak areas. By going through this process, schools may realize that their intramural lunch-hour program, for example, only consists of traditional types of programs (e.g., floor hockey, volleyball, basketball). The committee could then identify other types of non-traditional programs (e.g., general skill development, aerobics, pickleball, etc.) that could be offered to try and attract other students who would normally not participate.

An active schools also does everything it can to maximize the resources within it's community and looks for unique and innovative ways to use these resources to promote and encourage physical activity. For example, active schools such as those in Canada, Australia, and England all report using community facilities such as local climbing walls, curling rinks, swimming pools, lawnbowling clubs, and cross-country ski or bike trails to promote physical activity among members of the school community. Many times, local clubs such as ethnic clubs (e.g., Ukrainian Dance Club) or athletic clubs (e.g., Rowing Clubs, Gymnastic Clubs) are eager to promote their activities and allow students and teachers to use their facilities in hopes of

attracting new members. In addition, school facilities and equipment such as the gymnasium, playgrounds, and classrooms within an active school are made available to members of the school community to use for physical activity purposes before, during, and after school. For example, in Australia and Ontario, member schools have reported that they organize running clubs for students, staff, and family members during non-school times. Other schools have also reported projects whereby equipment (e.g., tennis racquets, snowshoes) could be signed out, much like library books, by students and/or families to use during their leisure time.

Active schools also maximize educational resources (e.g., ideas from professional journals, physical activity programs with a sound research base) and promote their success stories within the school community and with other schools by maximizing the use of their communication resources. This can be done through bulletin boards, web pages, school and local newsletters, parent councils, or any other source of media at the school's disposal. The Ever Active Program, for example, shares promising practices on their website that other member schools have completed while the Active Schools Network in Australia sends out a newsletter of successes. Member schools have also adopted similar projects by announcing up-coming active school events in their school newspaper. The key is to spread the word about what is going on and to encourage others to take part. This will not only raise the profile of schools and the importance of active living, but it also has the potential of stimulating new ideas and sharing resources between schools to develop collaborative partnerships. Active schools need not "re-invent the wheel". There are many excellent resources available to schools at the local (e.g., community recreation department), provincial (e.g., provincial health and physical education associations), national (e.g., CAHPERD, Go for Green, Heart and Stroke), and international (e.g., web-sites like PE Central: [www.pecentral.org](http://www.pecentral.org)) levels. Tapping into and sharing these

resources is critical to formulating “quality” active school programs that can have a positive impact on members of the school community.

Maximising resources is important because it recognizes the importance of providing a variety of inclusive programs. An active school not only recognizes the importance of established athletic teams and clubs (e.g., soccer teams, track and field, etc.), but also recognizes the importance of other types of physical activity programs that require minimal resources for members of the school community. Active schools in Alberta and Ontario, for example, have organized walking school bus programs for children to and from school (see [www.goforgreen.ca](http://www.goforgreen.ca) for more information and ideas) and have organized classroom fitness breaks throughout the school day. Other practices that have been reported are special events such as Family Days or Clubs where family members and students take part in physical activity programs together. Other ideas that have been reported by active school members include multi-sport intramural or club activities for beginners or for those who do not enjoy competitive sport programs or multicultural activities (e.g., cricket, Celtic dance, Jai Jali). The possibilities are endless, but the key is to be creative and to maximize the school community's resources in order to provide a variety of activities so that nobody feels left out.

*Oneness.* Another key element in building an active school is for members of the school community working together to provide physical activity opportunities. The word oneness is commonly associated with terms like unity, harmony, and agreement. Members of the school community have an obligation to unite together and share in the responsibility of educating children and youth. Asking teachers and principals to shoulder the sole obligation of implementing yet another program on their own within their schools is not a realistic expectation. Thus, all those who have a vested interest in schools (e.g., parents, school boards,

post-secondary institutions, national and provincial organizations) need to agree to provide support to help plan and implement an active schools program. “It is essential to identify and involve concerned partners in the development and implementation of policies and programs promoting physical activity at all levels, especially those targeting school-age children and young people” (World Health Organization, 2000, p. 12). For example, university and college professors can become involved by encouraging their students to volunteer at a local school that has implemented an active school program or by offering to help find funding to implement and evaluate initiatives within an active school. Local sports clubs, recreation centres/ departments, and health units can become involved by putting on demonstrations and/or organizing participation events that raise students' awareness of activities within their community that are available to them after school-hours and during vacation periods. For example, students in active school programs in England and Australia receive information about sporting opportunities in their communities and how they can become involved. Parents can be involved by volunteering to organize and run extra-curricular school programs and clubs. For example, parents in an Active School in Ontario officiate their children's basketball games. Other initiatives that have been reported by active school members to collectively enhance physical activity opportunities have included older students providing playground activities for younger students, in-services taught by physical education specialists in the school to generalists, and officials and elite athletes visiting schools to take an active role in physical education lessons. The key is to work together as a school community towards a common goal of providing physical activity opportunities to as many as possible.

*Values physical activity.* An active school is one that demonstrates to the entire school community that it values the importance of physical activity. This could be done by setting

policies that support and promote various aspects of active schools (Fox, 1996). For example, Active Schools in England encourages schools to establish school policies to ensure all members of the school community receive active living opportunities. An Active Australia school also reported adopting "Be Active Every Day" as their school slogan. Other possible examples could include ensuring there are enough bicycle racks available for students and staff to cycle to school or creating a timetable to ensure each classroom receives Quality Daily Physical Education (e.g., a minimum of 150 minutes of class instruction time and activity periods per week per student). It may also include policies put in place to ensure the surrounding environment promotes safe physical activity. For example, during recess in one Active Australian school, an extra staff member is placed on yard duty to teach children how to make active and safe decisions on the playground. School boards can also demonstrate the value of physical activity by providing funding to teachers to attend conferences or workshops on active school initiatives or implementing a hiring policy for more physical education specialists within their schools. Other initiatives that send a message to the school community may include active school bulletin boards or posters displayed throughout the school to announce up-coming activities or to promote previous initiatives. For example, every Ever Active school in Alberta receives a poster which they can display in a prominent place in their school, keep track of their initiatives and promote up-coming Ever Active events. Schools can also host physical activity assemblies where individual staff members and/or other members from the school community are invited to demonstrate their commitment to an active school. In both Alberta and Australia, schools have indicated that they have held school assemblies to showcase various types of physical activity initiatives in their school community. This also provides students within the school with positive

role models to emulate and look to for support and sends a clear message that their school values physical activity.

*Education.* Quality, instructional physical education programs that are offered on a regular (preferably daily) basis, are delivered by qualified teachers, and that implement curriculum that develop the necessary "healthy active living skills" are the *foundation* upon which an active school is built upon. This foundation is a fundamental right for all children (World Health Organization, 2000). The purpose of all schools is to provide a learning environment that supports children and youths' overall development. Developmentally appropriate curricula from different subject areas have carefully been developed to help foster this overall development. Health and physical education curricula are no exception. Over the past decade, there has been a shift in health and physical education curricula across Canada (Luke, 2000). Many of these curricula have been written using an active living philosophy. That is to say, curricular objectives have been generated so that children develop the necessary skills to lead an active and healthy lifestyle on a regular basis. Not only are these curricula focused on providing students with the necessary "fundamental skills" (e.g., manipulative, locomotor, stability) and knowledge of what a healthy lifestyle entails (e.g., nutrition, daily activity), but they also focus on co-operating with others, developing individual goals, monitoring progress, creating new activities, and developing leadership skills to encourage others to be active. As a result of education being the foundation of active schools, many schools that offer Quality Daily Physical Education (QDPE) have also been recognized as Ever Active and Active Schools in Alberta and Ontario respectively. As well, many schools have indicated that they offer a balanced physical education program whereby all activity dimensions are used to achieve the curricular outcomes.

Active schools also integrate health and physical activity into other curricular subjects. For example, some schools report keeping track of the number of kilometres students actively travel (e.g., cycle, walk, run, roller blade) to and from school and then charting these distances on a map displayed within classrooms or in the school. Students then use this to learn about the geography or history of the places they travel to on the map or graph their progress over time (e.g., a math component). Alternatively, students could integrate other subjects into their physical education classes. For example, an Active School in Australia recently added a psychology of involvement component to their high-school physical education class. In this unit, students learn skills such as goal setting, assertiveness, and exercise values.

### *Conclusion*

As indicated at the beginning, there are concerns across the globe that people are becoming less active. As a result, concerns have been raised about the negative impact this will have on citizens' quality of life and on countries' health care costs. The potential impact that schools can have on helping to reverse this trend is tremendous. By instilling in children and the rest of the school community the importance of physical activity and exposing them to enjoyable physical activities, there is an increased likelihood of fostering a more active generation. An active school can use the building blocks previously described and the promising practices already in place in schools across the globe to help educate and provide members of the school community with the skills, values, knowledge, and resources to lead an active life.

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Table 1

*Examples of Possible Active School Initiatives Under Each Building Block*

Building Block	Examples
<b>M</b> aximize resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• use existing educational resources (e.g., Canadian Active Living Challenge, websites like PE Central)</li> <li>• use community facilities such as curling club or tennis club</li> <li>• allow students to sign-out equipment to use</li> <li>• turn classrooms into aerobic studio before and after school</li> <li>• use school web-page or newspaper to promote up-coming activities</li> <li>• provide a mixture of traditional programs (e.g., track and field team, floor hockey intramurals) and non-traditional programs (e.g., walking school bus club, classroom fitness breaks)</li> <li>• allow community to use school facilities for physical activity (e.g., Saturday morning running club for members of school community)</li> </ul>
<b>O</b> penness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• invite experts from the community to run a workshop or theme day (e.g., Ukrainian Dance Club, rowing coaches)</li> <li>• form an Active Schools committee made up of parents, students, teachers, and other members of the school community</li> <li>• encourage multicultural activities</li> <li>• invite sport organizations to talk about sport opportunities for students in the local community</li> <li>• develop a physical education mentoring program for generalist teachers</li> </ul>
<b>V</b> alues physical activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• policy to ensure each class receives QDPE</li> <li>• environment encourages physical activity (e.g., bicycle racks, posters promoting physical activity)</li> <li>• teachers and parents are active role models for students</li> <li>• safe equipment and play spaces</li> <li>• hire physical education specialists for PE program</li> <li>• students support and encourage each other to be active (e.g., PE buddies)</li> <li>• an Active School message centre to promote previous and up-coming activities within the school community</li> <li>• incorporate physical activity into the school's mission statement</li> <li>• funding for teachers to attend workshops and conferences on physical activity</li> <li>• physical activity assemblies</li> </ul>
<b>E</b> ducation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• take students to community facilities as part of physical education class</li> <li>• integrate other subjects into physical education class AND integrate physical activity into other curricular subjects</li> </ul>

Figure Caption

*Figure 1.* The building blocks of an Active School.

