

Testimony of

Phil Lawler

Director, PE4life Instruction and Outreach

Hearing on

“Using School Wellness Plans to Help Fight Childhood Obesity”

Before

House Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Community

2175 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington D.C.

Thursday, May 10, 2007
2:00 p.m.

I want to thank the members of the panel for allowing me the opportunity to speak today about an issue that I am very passionate about. I firmly believe that physical education must play a critical role in attacking the childhood obesity crisis negatively impacting our young people.

My name is Phil Lawler. I am Director of Instruction and Outreach for PE4life. PE4life is a non-profit whose mission is to inspire active, healthy living by advancing the development of daily, health-and-wellness-based physical education programs for all children, not just the athletically inclined. Not only am I convinced that the “PE4life Way” can greatly increase the fitness levels of students, K-12, across the country, I believe that the PE4life approach to physical education can enhance academic performance and reduce discipline issues in schools. I’ll address those two issues later in my testimony.

For 35 years, I served as a physical education teacher in Naperville, IL. I’m proud to say that our physical education program evolved into one of the most respected PE programs in the country over the last 15 years. In fact, our program was chosen by PE4life to be the country’s first PE4life Academy. PE4life Academies are exemplary, daily physical education programs that also serve as training centers for other schools and communities.

However, our Naperville physical education program wasn’t always as effective as it is today. And I wasn’t always as passionate about health-and-wellness-based physical education as I am today. In fact, at one time, I was one of the staunchest supporters of the “old PE,” a model built around sports skills and athletic performance. I’m sure many of you here today can relate to the “old PE” model of physical education, which also included humiliating activities like dodge ball.

Let me give you a quick example of when I saw the light. Our department had acquired a single heart rate monitor. I hadn’t used it but one day I took it out and put it on a girl I didn’t believe was working very hard in class. In the old days of PE assessment, we said, “let’s run a mile, and if you can’t run a mile under eight minutes, you’re a failure.” How many people in this country were turned off to exercise by those standards? I put the heart rate monitor on a young lady who didn’t have asthma and wasn’t overweight. So, based on her 13.5-minute mile, I deemed her a failure. But when I downloaded her heart rate monitor, her average heart rate was 187. By just using my observation as a physical education instructor she wasn’t doing anything, she wasn’t expending any effort. But in reality, the heart rate monitor told me she was working too hard.

Now with this technology, we won’t make that mistake again. We will personalize PE and we’ll give kids credit for what they do and the effort they expend. Technology like heart rate monitors, pedometers, and interactive exer-games are definitely part of the PE4life Way today.

We have all heard the scary statistics about the health crisis facing our nation’s youth. You’ll hear plenty more today. But suffice it to say, we’re facing a major challenge in this country with our children. To me, however, the numbers are too impersonal.

They're shocking but they don't hit home. But I came across a couple quotes that hit me like a ton of bricks. I think they really drive home the challenge we're all facing today.

According to Dr. William J. Klish, professor of pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine, "Children today have a shorter life expectancy than their parents for the first time in 100 years." Think about that, given the medical and technological advancements of the last several decades. "Children today have a shorter life expectancy than their parents for the first time in 100 years." That's a scary but powerful statement.

Dr. K.M. Venkat Narayan, diabetes epidemiologist for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stated, "One in every three U.S. children born after 2000 will become diabetic unless many more people start eating less and exercising more." One in every three!

I think former surgeon general, Dr. Richard Carmona, summarized the situation the best when he said, "As we look to the future and where childhood obesity will be in 20 years ... it is every bit as threatening to us as is the terrorist threat we face today. It is the threat from within."

Physical education can be a key part of the solution to that threat, maybe the most important part of the solution. However, for that to be the case, several issues must be addressed. At PE4life, we see three key problems with our nation's current physical education system: 1) The dramatic decline in the number of students taking physical education classes on a daily basis; 2) The continued emphasis on the "sports model" of physical education that overemphasizes team sports skill development and participation at the expense of health and wellness education and lifelong physical activity skill development and participation; and 3) Grading students based on skills and innate abilities versus effort and progress toward individualized goals.

To combat these problems, the PE4life program is about getting kids active now and instilling the lifetime benefits of health and wellness. It's about enabling each student to maintain a physically-active lifestyle forever. It means emphasizing fitness and well-being, not athleticism. It eliminates practices that humiliate students. And it assesses students on their progress in reaching personal physical activity and fitness goals. A P.E.4life program exposes kids to the fun and long-term benefits of *movement* – it's really that simple.

That said, while our emphasis is teaching the lifetime health-and-wellness benefits of physical activity, PE4life programs still teach team sports but the focus is on small-sided sports: four-on-four football; three-on-three basketball, four-on-four soccer, so more kids get involved, touch the ball more often, and move to a greater degree.

PE4life advocates exposing students to a variety of sports and fitness activities through physical education so our children can make educated choices about the physical activities that are most appropriate for their personalities and lifestyles.

I think if there was one thing I would like children to take away from their PE4life experience, it would be the importance of regular exercise. Quality, health-and-wellness-based physical education is crucial in helping children reap the long-term benefits of physical fitness and in establishing this healthy habit for life.

An important point of my testimony today is that this isn't just a theoretical philosophy. The PE4life model is working in real schools, with real students. We have strong evidence that the PE4life Way improves students' health and wellness. And increasingly, we're building the research support for the PE4life model's impact on academic performance and discipline issues as well.

I'm going to give you a brief overview of some of the exciting research PE4life's compiling. The nationally-respected Fitnessgram assessment, which evaluates students in six fitness-related categories, was used to compare the physical fitness levels of 9th grade students in Naperville, IL (once again, home to the first P.E.4life Academy) with their 9th grade, non-P.E.4life counterparts in California. In all six categories, the Naperville students far out-paced their counterparts in California. In the two most significant categories, "aerobic capacity" and "body composition," the results were significantly in favor of the Naperville kids. For example, of the 1,500 freshmen in Naperville, only 3% were found to be overweight or obese. On the other hand, 32% of their 9th grade counterparts in California, were overweight or obese. In the "aerobic capacity" category, 80% of Naperville freshmen were in the "healthy fitness zone" versus only 50% of the California students.

As a result of performances like that, parents of the students at Madison Junior High School, my former school and home base for the Naperville PE4life Academy, voted physical education the #1 curriculum in the school.

Other PE4life Academies around the country, all of which have been recipients of the Carol M. White PEP grant, are seeing similar results in the areas of fitness and health and wellness. But the research that's really starting to get me excited is the findings showing that physically-fit kids perform better academically.

In a California Department of Education study looking at 5th, 7th, and 9th graders, based on the same Fitnessgram assessment that I just cited, the students that were the most fit also performed the best on math and reading assessments.

In another study, undertaken at a PE4life Academy, high school students that took a fitness-based physical education course before the regular school day began, in addition to a literacy class, improved their reading and comprehension scores by 1.4 years on a grade-level equivalency scale. That represented a 50% greater improvement in reading and comprehension scores than seen by the students in the study who took the literacy class alone.

The bottom line is, fit kids perform better academically. This is a critical point in this era of No Child Left Behind. Despite the worsening childhood obesity epidemic in this

country, many physical education programs are being dropped or significantly scaled back. And the reason given by school administrators and board members? Academic pressures that stem primarily from federal No Child Left Behind mandates and state standardized academic assessments.

As Dr. John Ratey, an expert on exercise's impact on the brain from Harvard Medical School says, "The greatest fallacy in American education today is that dropping physical education will improve academic performance."

In fact, Ratey goes on to say that "exercise is the one thing we know that optimizes brain function. It's so good, it's like Miracle-Gro."

Another exciting piece of PE4life research comes from our PE4life Academy in urban Kansas City, Missouri. The study at Woodland Elementary School looked at discipline issues before and after the implementation of a daily PE4life program at the school. Suspension days dropped from 1,177 to 392 (a 67% decrease). Discipline incidents (fighting, etc.) dropped from 228 to 94 (a 59% decrease). The only significant difference from one year to the next at Woodland was the implementation of a daily PE4life program.

Woodland's principal, Craig Rupert said, "PE4life has had a tremendous positive influence on the lives of the students at Woodland Elementary School. It has not just increased the levels of fitness we are seeing in our kids, but they are also more motivated throughout the day. Enthusiasm is way up and office referrals are way down."

Much more research needs to be done in the area of quality physical education and its impact on discipline issues but this is exciting stuff.

I would like to take just a minute to discuss how well PE4life is positioned to be an ideal School Wellness plan implementation partner for schools across the nation. For the 2006-2007 school year, school districts were required to have a wellness policy in place.

Undoubtedly, getting to this point was a big challenge. Nevertheless, a bigger challenge is now staring schools in the face: How do we most effectively implement these policies?

The School Wellness law was designed to be an important new tool to promote wellness-based physical education programs, healthy eating and other school-based physical activities. In order to enhance the chances of success, the legislation also requires that local wellness policies have an implementation plan in place. This can't simply be a "get the policy done and place it on the shelf" exercise. These plans must be implemented and then evaluated on a regular basis. Additionally, the law requires that a broad group of local stakeholders be involved in the development and execution of the wellness policy.

From its inception, the "PE4life Way" has been a community-based, stakeholder-driven approach to quality physical education focused on measurable outcomes. Our Academies

provide training to a wide-variety of school and community leaders in the development of their own PE4life programs, including a step-by-step implementation plan for their School Wellness initiatives. Moreover, PE4life helps Academy trainees cultivate partnerships designed to advocate for change in their communities, along with finding the community funding to make change real and lasting. The PE4life Way is all about getting local stakeholders involved.

It's also important to note that while we believe physical inactivity is the primary culprit in the childhood obesity epidemic, nutrition education is an important component of PE4life programs. In fact, we are partnering with the American Council on Fitness and Nutrition (ACFN) and the American Dietetics Foundation on a nutrition pilot study this fall.

PE4life is a young organization. We were founded in 2000. Nevertheless, we've made a tremendous impact. Our five PE4life Academies have hosted school/community teams from 34 states (and five countries), impacting 1,639 urban, suburban, rural, private and public schools and reaching 1.7 million students. Of the 188 school/community teams that PE4life Academies have trained, 60 of them have been Carol M. White PEP grant winners.

It's important to note that schools that have benefited from receiving a PEP grant have had a jump start in effectively implementing their School Wellness plans.

Each of our five PE4life Academies have themselves been recipients of a PEP grant. They are enjoying increases in fitness scores, decreases in discipline problems, and increases in academic performance. In turn, these Academies, as model physical education programs and training facilities for other schools, have been effective in helping other schools implement their Wellness policies.

Nevertheless, given the magnitude of this country's problem with sedentary young people, there is no doubt that PE4life needs to scale up quicker.

Ultimately, our goal is to have at least one PE4life Academy in every state. Over the next three years, our goal is to expand the number of PE4life Academies by 25 in order to positively impact the lives of thousands of additional students.

So, that's what we're all about. Our plan is to create "change agents" through our training programs. We see the PE4life Academies as change-agent factories, where community teams made up of administrators, board members, teachers, parents, health care professionals, and other community leaders come to learn about a seven-step plan for transforming the health and wellness of young people in their communities.

I know the PE 4life Way works. But I'm biased.

So, I'll let the "Father of Aerobics," Dr. Kenneth Cooper, from the Cooper Aerobics Center in Dallas, Texas, have the final word: "The PE4life approach is exactly what we

need to happen if we are to have any hope of avoiding a medical disaster with this generation of children.”

I want to thank the Committee for your leadership on the School Wellness Program and for this opportunity to testify. I also want to thank you for your ongoing support of the Carol M White PEP grant program in No Child Left Behind. As a PEP grant recipient, and someone who has worked closely with others who have received these grants, I know first hand how much this funding has done to energize and improve the quality of physical education throughout the country. This is the type of critical financial support we need as state budgets for education decline.

PE4life has set the stage for the type of health-and-wellness-based physical education our children need and programs like PEP go a long way toward helping us succeed. Schools that receive PEP grants are well positioned to implement successful School Wellness plans and become role models for other schools.

I know that No Child Left Behind is up for reauthorization this year. As you consider this important legislation, it is our hope that you include PEP with a significant authorization so more schools can provide the kind of physical education that will positively impact our children for the rest of their lives. The PEP program works. It needs to grow.

I look forward to answering any questions you may have.