

120_Huffines_Sports_Med_Wagner

Tim Lightfoot. We have Dr. Susan Wagner from here at Texas A&M with us. Welcome to the Podcast, Susan.

Susan Wagner. Thank you, Tim. Glad to be here.

Tim Lightfoot. We're going to take a few minutes and tell everybody that why you're here and then we'll just jump into this conversation. Dr. Wagner has a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction from Texas A&M University and she has other degrees in physical education from a couple of other universities. She taught physical education and elementary school for three years before she came back and got her degree and she became a professor here. She's a Clinical Assistant Professor here. She was the 2004 and 2001 Teacher of the Year here in kinesiology, she's the current coordinator of the kinesiology teacher certification, has been doing that since 2004, as a matter of fact, so we're here today to talk about physical education in the schools and that's your bailey wick and you're...let's start with why is physical education important in schools?

Susan Wagner. Well I just want to say too that it's my passion because I started there. I think physical education for children is extremely important as well as adolescence.

Tim Lightfoot. But why?

Susan Wagner. Because...

Tim Lightfoot. So many people want to take it out of schools. So many places have taken it out of schools.

Susan Wagner. Correct. It is a place where children learn how to move effectively and efficiently and learn motor skills that they might not learn otherwise. Many children today, of course, are involved in sports outside of school but there's many children who are not and a good, good movement background sets you on the path to lifetime physical activity.

Tim Lightfoot. Just simple things like throwing balls.

Susan Wagner. Yup.

Tim Lightfoot. Yeah.

Susan Wagner. Catching, kicking, trapping.

Tim Lightfoot. I know one of the places I was at before we had a program that helped kids that had motor development difficulties just learn simple stuff like that. Like throwing balls and kicking, as you said and even running and it's amazing how those large motor skills actually translated into fine motor skills like handwriting...

Susan Wagner. Correct.

Tim Lightfoot. ...and kids handwriting improved.

Susan Wagner. Yup.

Tim Lightfoot. So there you go. There's another reason for physical education.

Susan Wagner. That's important and another thing that's important is to have some knowledge about fitness. How do I...what is fitness and how do I stay fit? What things can I do? As we progress up the grade levels we try to infuse the idea that you can develop your own program and you can continue to be active after your graduate from high school. So I think that's an important message as well.

Tim Lightfoot. So once the kids learn that in elementary, do they need to do that in middle school? I know, again some of the middle schools and high schools really have a tendency to take physical education out of the curriculum for most of the students.

Susan Wagner. They do but don't you believe that children need to be active all their lives? How many hours a day do they spend in school where they're not active and if they had a period every day of physical activity in the schools that would be ideal.

Tim Lightfoot. Right. Now many a state's now I think put in some mandatory times that kids have got to be active so many...30 minutes for three days a week or whatever. Is that enough? Do we need to do more?

Susan Wagner. Correct. We need to do more.

Tim Lightfoot. Yeah.

Susan Wagner. We know that at least 60 minutes a day of moderate to vigorous physical activity, doesn't have to be in one big chunk, is optimal and up to two hours a day. You know how children are. If they are physically active they are better behaved, more able to concentrate in the classroom and some schools are honestly taking out recess for young children so there's less time for them to be physically active and I don't know about you. If you've driven by a school lately there's a line up of cars and they're being driven to school. I have a neighbor who drives two blocks to the school with her child, could walk, so we need to increase that, the walking and biking to school to help with the overall physical activity pattern. But without physical education in the schools we have a lot of lack of activity, especially middle school and high school.

Tim Lightfoot. Well how about the...I guess there are people that would say that's not important. That kids go to school to learn how to read, write and do arithmetic. Why should we even be concerned about that?

Susan Wagner. Yeah we have really good data that shows that a physically active child is a smarter child. Does better on standardized tests, if we're concerned about that, which we seem to be.

[00:05:00]

And so even in our own state of Texas the fitness gram data that we ran after the first two years of testing showed us that children who had better cardiovascular endurance did better on their tax tests.

Tim Lightfoot. So let's make sure that people hear this very clearly because I know this is a drum that I've been beating for a long time. You're saying that kids that are physically active in school do better on these standardized tests.

Susan Wagner. Yes. Or let's say the ones that perform better on those tests, on the fitness tests. That would not necessarily mean that being physically active in school translates, but I would say that given the fact that many children are not physically active outside of school, at least as much as they used to be because of other interesting, competing things to do like computers and video games and so forth, we can do much more having them be active in school. And if they're active in school the next hour after the activity they're sharper. They just do better. They sit better and they perform better. We've had wonderful research out of Naperville that shows us that students, they have a zero hour and those kids come in and workout before school and they do better academically in the subjects they have right after that workout. So it's...it translates.

Tim Lightfoot. So in all different ways we should have physical education in the school.

Susan Wagner. Oh no question.

Tim Lightfoot. Yeah, yeah. I don't know how much clearer we can be about that. I mean as you say the data is really deep and very clear about that. Why aren't people paying attention to that message?

Susan Wagner. It's costly. There's a cost associated with physical education, you have to hire a specialist. Many school districts require or states actually require specialists. If you think about gymnasiums, they're expensive. Equipment for physical education. However, I will tell you that most school districts do not spend a great deal of money on their physical education programs. I've seen averages of about \$700 to \$1,000 a year in a budget for one school which is very, very little.

Tim Lightfoot. Wow.

Susan Wagner. But if you maintain your equipment, you have good basketballs and so forth they stay for quite a long time, so if you invest wisely you can have good programs. And many, many school districts or good physical education teachers do a lot of creative equipment types of

things, even a tape ball that you can use. You just wrap up tape around a piece of newspaper and you can throw and catch it. So.

Tim Lightfoot. But people may be, they may be sitting there scratching their heads and say wait. Only \$700 to \$1,000 a year? But yet we see these football stadiums for middle schoolers and all the sports teams and all. How do we come to understand that paradox?

Susan Wagner. Societal. I think society values competitive sports and...

Tim Lightfoot. And that does not bleed over into the physical education program in the schools.

Susan Wagner. Does not seem to. I've had an experience here at home where one school district in this community decided to have what they call a wellness program in their middle school and require every student, and that included athletes, they required them to take it in middle school which meant that athletics had to be outside the school day entirely. And they were able to maintain that program for about two or three years and then the community just said oh no. We've got to have athletics back in the school day, so it came out as a requirement.

Tim Lightfoot. So they pulled wellness out for everyone and put athletics back in for the few.

Susan Wagner. Correct.

Tim Lightfoot. Not that we're bashing athletics.

Susan Wagner. No.

Tim Lightfoot. I think there's a role for that but we also are concerned about the health and well being of all the students.

Susan Wagner. Well...right and the knowledge.

Tim Lightfoot. Right.

Susan Wagner. The understanding. And the other place that they've really cut the cognitive piece is out of health education. In this state they have removed health education as a requirement in high school altogether and reduce physical education to one credit which amounts to one year out of four. And this is the time when students are dropping off the table in terms of physical activity anyway so...it's a mistake. It's a big mistake.

Tim Lightfoot. Yeah I think the national data shows that once they hit age 14, about the time they can start to drive their amount of activity doing on a daily basis just plummets.

Susan Wagner. Correct.

Tim Lightfoot. Plummets. I'm especially stunned about the health education. With so many health problems facing teenagers in particular coming down the road in life the fact that they don't have health education required.

Susan Wagner. Yup.

Tim Lightfoot. It's amazing.

Susan Wagner. It is amazing. Many schools have chosen to put it in the middle school but I think there's also some more optimal time for...like high school is a really good time to have some of that information as well, so. I don't know.

[00:10:01]

Tim Lightfoot. Yeah. I know at one point there was some discussion about making physical education and health education some of the tested on courses. So much of the...nowadays in schools the emphasis is placed on courses that are tested...

Susan Wagner. Tested, right.

Tim Lightfoot. ...at the end of the grade and so many of your arts and education and physical education have gone by the wayside. Is there any traction in that movement to make those testable items?

Susan Wagner. Yeah I don't know about the testable piece but I do know at the national level there is some legislation going around prompted by our First Lady who's a very huge proponent of physical activity in schools. And so there's a promotion there to have health and physical education be core subjects in the school curriculum and that's part of the elementary and secondary education act. And so we'll see how that plays out. It hasn't gone through yet and we're sort of waiting to hear. There's a lot of interesting things happen in legislative years and sessions and so forth and so that's something we hope for.

Tim Lightfoot. Yeah.

Susan Wagner. Yeah.

Tim Lightfoot. It's amazing when you talk to people individually most of them are in favor of physical education or health education...

SW Oh, yeah.

Tim Lightfoot. ...but then when it comes...somehow when it gets to the district and the school boards that stuff kind of gets written out, doesn't it?

Susan Wagner. Yeah. You would say, if I look at the data, about 90 percent of parents will tell you physical education's important, but when it comes down to brass tacks and supporting it

financially, that's another whole issue. If we could spend more time in math and science and those subjects that people deem as more important, then they'll go for that.

Tim Lightfoot. But the message is is if they're physically active they'll do better in those?

Susan Wagner. Yes they will. Yeah. And I think the physical activity in the school day is incredibly important. Yeah.

Tim Lightfoot. Yeah. Well I mean I can't imagine sitting at my desk for eight hours a day. I'm not sure how many people actually do that actually. There are times I have to get up and walk around.

Susan Wagner. Yup.

Tim Lightfoot. Because otherwise I can't imagine being a 7-year-old kid doing that.

Susan Wagner. No. Well they say...there's also some kind of movement and this is something else you might want to look into...there's a local group that's promoting stand up desks for elementary aged children and there's several model classrooms in the community where 1st grader, 2nd grader, 3rd grader has a desk, just they stand at. And now they do have the option of a chair, of a stool but it's a standing desk and increases their physical activity and increases their mental acuity and so forth. But you might say even a 7-year-old sitting at a desk never sits still so they're moving. That's about the same thing as physical education. The other problem with physical education is when they start to look at it, if you look at one school of about 600 kids in elementary and maybe 10, a thousand or so in middle school, and if you have one physical education teacher who has to see all of those kids, yeah, the commitment financially is what's kind of what's at issue here. And so if I'm an elementary PE teacher and I have to see all 600 kids, can I see them every day? Probably not. So the time that is devoted to PE or if I see them every day, then I have probably have 100 in a class and of course I have a big gym but the gym is not...if you put enough kids in there they can't move. So that's a problem.

Tim Lightfoot. It becomes like herding cats, yeah, yeah.

Susan Wagner. Yeah, oh yeah. But you can take some more kids because you got that big space but number one, 100 kids to one teacher is kind of ridiculous. In Texas they have asked that PE class sizes be brought down to the same level as a classroom teacher, 24 to 1 or 22 to 1 is the current. But...

TL Do you think it's going to work? Or not work but is that going to happen?

Susan Wagner. Partially, yes. Some of it has happened. I mean they're looking at 45 as the number.

Tim Lightfoot. Wow.

Susan Wagner. And then they talk about, well we'll give you a teacher's aide who's not a trained person and that's for crowd control mostly I suppose.

Tim Lightfoot. Interesting way to say that.

Susan Wagner. Yeah.

Tim Lightfoot. So let's talk about I guess the elephant in the room with physical education. And that is, physical education has been perceived as a I guess a weaker sister to some of the other academic subjects because so often I think that physical education hour block of time has been abused in the past. You'll throw somebody in there, just say, roll the ball out and let the kids go wild. How do you answer that kind of charge?

Susan Wagner. Yeah, yeah, well when we look at who they put in the classroom, yeah, you're absolutely right. There's a number of people that are not well trained that end up in the physical education environment and so they can do more harm than good. And quite honestly, sometimes the PE is just about crowd control. Can this person manage 100 kids at one time and actually get some activity?

[00:14:59]

What an ideal program would have is at least 50 percent of the time that they're in there they're moving at a moderate to vigorous level so if we're there a half an hour, we would have 15 minutes of good quality movement. But if we got 100 kids in there, the difficulty is that they don't get the movement. And you're right too. There's some sloth, I will say, in the ranks. Unfortunately that's admittedly a problem and particularly in our secondary levels those teaching positions tend to go...and I hate to say this because I love coaches and I think athletics is great, but sometimes when a coach is assigned to physical education they think of it is as a lesser assignment and they don't devote as much time to doing quality work there. And yes they look at it as being if I can keep those kids busy and out of trouble, then that's good enough. And it's not. It's really not. When we say physical education we're talking about an education. Are they learning? And we should have real, tangible outcomes. I've seen...I would be in favor of seeing a graduation requirement of a fitness level for all kids.

Tim Lightfoot. So they have to meet a certain fitness level...

Susan Wagner. Yeah.

Tim Lightfoot. ...before they get out?

Susan Wagner. Yup.

Tim Lightfoot. Yeah.

Susan Wagner. I don't think that'll ever happen.

Tim Lightfoot. Unfortunately no.

Susan Wagner. They do it at BYU, did you know that?

Tim Lightfoot. No I didn't know that.

Susan Wagner. Yeah. Brigham Young students have to have a...take a fitness test before they graduate.

Tim Lightfoot. Wow. That's great. Well I'm just sitting here thinking about, you talked about 45 kids in a class. I think I'd like our audience to take a moment and imagine having to supervise and organize physical activity for 45 students.

SW Five-year-olds.

Tim Lightfoot. Oh so five year.

Susan Wagner. Yeah, yeah. If you're not tying shoes and wiping tears you're, yeah. It's a challenge. So the people that are doing it and doing it well, they deserve a lot of credit. Yeah.

Tim Lightfoot. Wow. And you also touched on an interesting point there and the doing away of physical requirements in colleges and universities across the country. That has rapidly kind of gone away hasn't it?

Susan Wagner. Yup, yup. When I came to Texas A&M we had four required physical education classes. We got reduced to two. One of them had to be a health and fitness class and now our new core curriculum they're gone totally.

Tim Lightfoot. And that was a state mandate.

Susan Wagner. Yup. Well our Texas A&M had the option of whether or not to keep them in the core but something had to go and guess what? Science got in and activity got out.

Tim Lightfoot. Yeah. And people wonder why we have an obesity problem...

Susan Wagner. Yeah.

Tim Lightfoot. ...in the country with kids. And I think...this maybe is so unsexy to talk about being physically active because it seems to be a simple solution but it works, it works.

Susan Wagner. Yes it does.

Tim Lightfoot. And so...continues to amaze me. Help me with maybe the parents that are listening. We just had this imaginery...we've let them all organize a PE class with 45 children and they've already torn their hair out and that was an imagination. As a parent how do you know that your child is getting a good physical education experience? Let's call it that.

Susan Wagner. Yeah, yeah. A lot of kids will tell you right up front, they'll be able to tell you that was fun, I enjoyed that and sometimes what's fun is not always educational but if you just simply ask them, what did you learn? There's got to be a learning piece. They've got to come back and say I learned how to work with another person, I learned how to talk to that person and communicate while we were throwing a ball back and forth. So there's certain learning outcomes that should be happening and the parent could ask about that. The parent can actually find out how much time they're actually active in a class. The parent can go see. Go watch. I would recommend that if you're concerned. Yeah because I think quality, we've got to hold everybody accountable for good quality.

Tim Lightfoot. Are there outside the school sources that are springing up because we're taking PE out of the schools? Is this an opportunity for entrepreneurs to maybe...

Susan Wagner. Absolutely.

Tim Lightfoot. ...put PE in other places in the day? And we're not talking about organized sports. There's lots and lots of those. But other types of activity.

Susan Wagner. Well I think you'll find your health club gyms and those kinds of places are putting in what would be considered a physical education type of program. I see it all over this community and I think it's a trend. There's something called Crossfit Kids. There's programs out there that are a more generic rather than gymnastics, soccer, those sorts of things.

[00:19:57]

Yeah, I mean I think that that...somebody has to fill the gap and I think parents know that their kids need to be active. That's what they enroll them in sports quite often. Yeah.

Tim Lightfoot. Yeah it was interesting to me, we had done some work with the homeschooling community in another place that I was at and that was always my question to them was how do your kids get physical education and it was interesting how many of the YMCA's in those areas were putting together PE programs and these home school kids would come three days a week to the YMCA and do those kind of programs.

Susan Wagner. Yeah. I actually used to work with the home school group here and they brought their children to my movement lab and so my students, my children, my students got to practice teaching with their children and that worked out very, very well for them and for us because it...they needed that. And then I know recently another colleague has done the PE for the homeschoolers because my students volunteer to assist him with that. So there's been some of that collaboration here with the university, physical education, physical activity programs. But yeah I think it's unfortunate because it could be done in schools and it really...because there's so many kids that...how many kids can't afford to pay for an external physical activity program? Not that many. Yeah.

Tim Lightfoot. Right, right. And you know you brought it up at the beginning and I've seen it over my career, if kids learn basic motor skills, throwing a ball, kicking, running and so forth, it helps them in so many...in self-confidence as well.

Susan Wagner. Right, right. That's a very important point. When you're a child your confidence is developed from your body. It's not from your mind. You don't think about oh I'm smart. Oh I can do that. If you master your body and your body movement, that's really big, yeah.

Tim Lightfoot. And sometimes being smart and the kid is not advantageous, I mean as far as their peers go anyway.

Susan Wagner. Right, right, absolutely. The kid that's more skilled physically is the, generally they're more popular.

Tim Lightfoot. So if we made you president for the day, how do we change this? How do we make it different? What's the solution?

Susan Wagner. Well quite honestly, that we require quality physical education in the schools. Everybody has to take it and there's no opting out for any...there's a lot of reasons in many states that they can actually opt out of physical education. If it's a requirement the state that I grew up in, which is New York, at the time that I was going through school athletics was out of the school day and everybody took PE. And boy was it fun because everybody was there. The talented and the untalented, everybody together and we all had a good time because it was designed differently than the competitive environment, so yeah, I think states could step up and then school districts could pony up. That would be the thing. And really I think it's personnel issue more than it's an equipment issue because as I said, their budgets are very small at this point, but facilities too. If you got to build a big gym, then it's expensive, so. But we can be active outside. I taught in Phoenix, Arizona and there I didn't have a gym. Everything was outdoors. And boy I'll tell you what. When it was hot, it was hot.

Tim Lightfoot. They say it's a dry heat.

Susan Wagner. Oh yeah but it was hot and they would soak the grass and it would be humid. So it was not nice, but anyway.

Tim Lightfoot. Wow. We're running out of time. Been a great conversation. We give our guest opportunity to give us a take home message. What do you want people to remember from this conversation?

Susan Wagner. I want them to remember the 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day for kids. I want all kids to be that active every single day, whether it's in PE, in recess or going to and from school, or at home.

Tim Lightfoot. It doesn't have to be all at once either.

Susan Wagner. Nope, nope, accumulated.

Tim Lightfoot. Yeah, super. Thank you so much for being with us today.

Susan Wagner. Okay.

Tim Lightfoot. We'll have you back on later. We'll check progress of how this is working out.

Susan Wagner. Oh goodness. Years.

Tim Lightfoot. We plan on doing this for years.

Susan Wagner. Okay, good.

Tim Lightfoot. Yeah. I'd like to thank you all for being with us today and listening and our regular listeners know that it's this time of the program when we have our podcast question of the week and with that question here is Cheryl.

Cheryl. How many minutes a day should children be active?

[00:24:23]