

Organizing Effective Elementary and High School Intramural Programs

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When I began to think of intramural programs for elementary and high schools I thought of something else I once wrote, “I loved going to school and coming home. I loved recess and lunch. It was the in-between part that got to me” (Byl, 2002). I was always one of the first ones at school so I could be the first one up at baseball. Before and after recess and lunch, I and other classmates would continually think about the neat activities we did during those breaks. I loved the activities and times with classmates. These memories played a significant role in how I got involved with developing great intramural activities for kids.

The Benefits are Beyond Personal

Research supports the joy and benefits that I experienced personally through physical activity in intramurals. The major delight for me was to have FUN. But, as research shows, good programs also develop physical fitness, enhance positive competition, develop positive character, and give opportunity for leadership building. Fun physical activity decreases anxiety and depression and enhances participant feelings of well-being (Cai 2000, Balady 2000). Research also shows that those involved in physical activity tend to come to class ready to learn, have improved concentration, and have improved overall academic performance (Alsager 1977, Balady 2000, Reich and Zantra 1981, Kleiber and Kirshnit 1991). Thus, offering wild and wacky games with great organization can enhance students’ experience of fun, while also providing a variety of physical, social, and emotional benefits.

Healthy Competition

Often today, competition is considered a dirty word. However, developing **healthy, safe, and fun** competition for all can strengthen a program. Sometimes taking the edge off a too competitive basketball game can be as simple as replacing the ball with a rubber chicken. Research shows that good character can be developed through programs that de-emphasize winning and provide positive leadership about fair play (we’ll talk more on fair play later).

Students can be Awesome Leaders

Leadership opportunities abound in intramural programs and are fabulous opportunities to enhance these skills (Coleman and Iso-Ahola 1993, Fabian 1982). Intramural programs provide great opportunities for our students to be creative, and to become directly involved in developing activities that they want to enjoy. Instead of developing lists or rules for recess behaviour, let the students get involved in developing fun games for students that they want to play.

How to Organize and Run an Effective Intramural Program

What's the mission?

First and foremost, organizers should have a good sense of what they want the intramural program to be. Not many of us hop in our cars and just drive. Most of us have a destination. What is the destination or mission of your program? Is it to have fun, to encourage active participation by as many as possible, or will it serve as a feeder system for your school's athletic program? Clearly the kind of intramural program developed from different mission statements will be very different. My philosophy is partially directed by a leading intramuralist, Pat Doyle, who says, "It's kids first, all the kids." Put a little time into deciding where you want to go. Brainstorm about the underlying theme. From that, develop a brief statement that is realistic and builds excitement. Use that mission statement in your promotional materials, schedules, meetings, or wherever intramurals are discussed in order to help the entire program stay on track.

Ensure a welcoming environment

In my personal school experiences, it was the students that organized intramural-type activities. We were our own leaders, and most of the activities that we developed were pretty neat. This helped us tremendously in developing great leadership skills. However, looking back, there are some aspects that we could have done better. For one, our methods of picking teams were not always methods that promoted a welcoming environment for all students, in fact in some cases they were pretty demeaning. Better planning, empathy, and guidance from a caring and informed teacher may have helped us to make the program that much more positive and inclusive for all students.

Creative use of facilities and equipment

Make the best of what your school has to offer. If your gym and outdoor field space are minimal, consider how you can use alternative spaces such as large classrooms, hallways, or parking lots. (For great asphalt games, look at Pat Doyle's book *Active Playgrounds* - available through CAHPERD). In addition, determine ways that you can make occasional use of community facilities such as pools or bowling alleys, and be creative with how you play the game. In the case of bowling, try ten different frames of throwing the ball (right hand, left hand, between the legs forward, between the legs backward, and so on).

Most schools have physical education equipment that can be accessed for intramural programs. You may also consider creating a recess bag of equipment for each classroom that is comprised of traditional and/or creative equipment. The inside bladder of an old soccer ball or volleyball provides an erratic and safe ball to kick or hit in intramural games, and is a great equalizer. (Coming Soon - CAHPERD's *Out of the Box* is a fabulous resource that provides an array of activities using innovative equipment that can be found at the local dollar store, such as scrub-brushes, plastic place mats, and much more. Visit www.cahperd.ca for ordering information.)

Consider various scheduling and team formations

Schedule intramurals at a time that will facilitate participation by as many students as possible. You may need to be flexible to the varying needs of the different grades. For instance, some K-5 schools divide the noon hour gym use for K-3 on Monday and Wednesday, grades 4-5 on Tuesday and Thursday, and special events on Fridays.

Other schools divide the entire school into four groups called houses. When certain houses are scheduled to compete, anyone from that house can participate. The advantage of assigned houses is that the competition schedules are always the same. The disadvantage is that students cannot always participate with their friends that are on different teams. Thus participation levels may decline.

A third option is to allow students to form the teams. In these later two scenarios, teams usually compete in a league or tournament schedule. These teams may stay the same throughout the

year, or may be changed at certain times or for different activities. The advantage of self-selected teams is that they usually consist of friends and thus students are more likely to continue participating. The disadvantage is that it does require more organization because different numbers of teams show up for different events. It is also not conducive to a shy student who may not seek out a team. A solution to this would be to encourage students to sign up as “free agents” that are assigned to various teams.

The greatest assets are at your fingertips – Students!

To run effective intramurals it is critical to develop a group of students to help organize and run the program. In addition to the fabulous leadership skills that students develop, it reduces the workload on the teacher or intramural program director. There are a few ways to obtain student leadership support such as teacher selection, placing a call for volunteers, or organizing intramural council elections.

Provide teacher recognition

Even with student support, organizing intramural programs requires a substantial commitment from school staff. Principals are encouraged to formally recognize intramural programs as an extra task required of a teacher. In addition, consider how tasks can be divided among a team of staff (for example, a teacher that oversees promotions, another that oversees scheduling, and another that oversees student leadership training or supervision). And finally, look for ways to use the skills and talents of various staff. Perhaps the art teacher can assist with creating great posters, the band teacher can gather students to play music, or a teacher with great badminton skills can run special badminton-type activities or can compete against the student who won the badminton tournament. The important thing is to capitalize on people’s strengths and to make them feel appreciated.

Provide proper training

Officials play an important part in competitive programs. They need to be trained to know the rules (but keep them simple), to be confident in their decision making, to make their calls consistently and decisively, to position themselves effectively, to use proper and authoritative signals, and to be objective. Officials should look professional. If possible, provide them with an

official's shirt they can slip on. Be sure to recognize them for their contributions during the school year or at year-end celebrations.

Promote Fair Play

Five fair play principals:

1. **Give everyone an equal chance to participate** - Design activities or change rules to ensure that everyone participates equally. For example, have students play soccer while sitting on scooters or play floor hockey with a small piece of carpet under each foot so players have to shuffle rather than run.
2. **Respect the rules** – Communicate and post rules in a visible location.
3. **Respect officials and their decisions.** – Publicly recognize the important work of officials and ensure that all students respect their positions at all times.
4. **Respect opponents** - Teach respect for opponents. Consider having each team pick someone from the opposing team who best represented fair play.
5. **Maintain self-control at all times** – This requires ongoing monitoring by leaders and supervisors.

Safety, Safety, Safety

Doing everything you can to ensure safety minimizes player injuries and reduces liability issues. Develop safety policies for proper attire, competition levels, body contact, and facility use. Plan appropriate procedures for when injuries do occur.

Promote the program and its mission

Use simple and creative ways to promote the program. If the program is about fun, use wild posters and wacky PA announcements. If the program is about inclusivity, then use pictures of all kinds of people. If the program is about respect, then establish fair play awards as a key part of the program.

Use traditional means such as PA announcements, bulletin boards, and posters to promote the program. Demonstrate the next intramural event during lunch in the cafeteria. Or, have your

intramural council carry a turnip with them for a day. When asked why they are carrying a turnip, they can say “to announce the next great intramural event, and they should ‘turn up’.”

Celebrate Success

Organize awards throughout the year. Small prizes consistent with the mission of the program will reinforce your program objectives. Periodically provide a free gym to fair play winners, announce special achievements on the school PA system, and take pictures of unique accomplishments. Plan an end-of-year assembly, special breakfast or lunch to acknowledge outstanding intramural participants (a person who officiated the most games, a team that won the most fair play awards, leaders who helped the program succeed).

Little can be done without money, but intramurals can be done with little money. Talk to your principal and bring this person on side and see if the school can spring some dollars. Ask your school’s parent council if they want to sponsor an aspect of the program (perhaps the awards). Be creative with fund raising and frugal in your spending.

There are a lot of students that experience a lot of benefits from quality intramural activities. Ask yourself what you are doing to improve the lives of students and the overall spirit of the school? Intramural activities take time to organize, but dealing with the problems of boredom will take even more time. Be proactive and help students enjoy the benefits of a great intramural program.

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