Heisman Trophy Winner: Physical Education Saved My Life

By Herschel Walker

My father gave me a quarter every day before school when I was little so that I could buy myself a snack.

But I wouldn't buy a snack. Instead, I gave the quarter to a classmate, just to get someone to talk to me without calling me "dumb" or "weird" or "fat."

I was a chubby kid with no confidence. I was bullied, called names, and beaten up. I barely spoke because of my stutter. Teachers would put me in a corner and tell me I was "special." I was scared to death of everybody.

My saving grace was physical education.

Physical activity became my refuge. Being active was a healthy way to channel my frustration and insecurities.

Physical education gave me so much: focus, purpose, hope. Those elements helped turn that scared little boy into an accomplished athlete, a valedictorian, and the successful businessman I am today.

Without physical education, I wouldn't have learned many of the skills that improved my life both on and off the football field. These skills remain with me, fueling my advocacy for all children to reap the same benefits from physical education that I did.

P.E. can help children who face many different challenges in and out of school. It can benefit kids of all shapes, sizes, and backgrounds.

That's why I've been a proud champion for physical education for more than 15 years. I believe that physical education can be a catalyst for positive change in a child's life, just as it was in mine. Research shows that quality physical education can help build health, confidence, and better academic outcomes. Quality P.E. teaches physical-literacy skills and healthy habits that last a lifetime.

Yet, despite being in the midst of a full-blown inactivity epidemic, our country isn't embracing physical education.

How bad is this epidemic? Nearly three-fourths of American youths aren't getting the 60 minutes of daily physical activity recommended by health experts.
The results are deadly. Research reported by the sports-leader group Champions for America's Future, of which I am a member, shows that one in every 10 premature deaths in the United States is the result of inactivity, owing to ailments that include heart disease, diabetes, and certain types of cancer.

Problems related to inactivity also contribute to the fact that seven out of 10 young adults can’t qualify for military service in this country. In addition, a lack of physical activity costs our economy an estimated $117 billion annually.

Physical education can help fight those results. Getting children to embrace healthy habits makes a difference. Research indicates that the longer kids stay active during childhood, the more likely they are to be active when they’re adults. In fact, young people who are active throughout adolescence are roughly seven to 13 times more likely to remain active as adults.

Disappointingly, physical education has become harder to find in school settings over the past decade. According to a 2014 study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the percentage of schools that require students to take physical education for graduation or promotion to the next grade level declined from 96 percent in 2000 to 77 percent in 2014.

We need to reverse this trend and teach these lifelong skills.

We need to commit adequate resources and class time to P.E. We need to maintain appropriate teacher-student ratios. We need to foster high-quality instruction that teaches children how to enjoy living active lives, not merely to play certain sports.

The benefits of making that investment will travel beyond the gymnasium and into the classroom: Studies have shown that physical activity can improve academic performance and mental health.

One study found that an after-school program providing an hour or two of physical activity significantly improved participating children's working memory, a key component of learning, reasoning, and comprehension. Another study showed that incorporating 20 minutes of physical activity into the school day significantly improved test scores in reading, math, and spelling.

The case for investing in P.E. is compelling, and Congress has the perfect opportunity to take action very soon when lawmakers craft a bill for federal spending for the upcoming fiscal year. The recently passed Every Student Succeeds Act, an education law that promotes academic opportunity for all children, authorized a $1.6 billion grant program to support a variety of services, including physical education programs.

This is the year for Congress to seize the moment to recognize the important, positive impacts physical education has on health and academic performance. Congress should fully fund and embrace the Student Support and Academic Enrichment grant program to
support vital programs like P.E.

This funding is crucial for making P.E. possible in more communities across the nation, especially because, according to one survey, **the average physical education program receives only $764 per year** from the school budget.

If we want to give children a path to better health and improved academic outcomes, while also pushing back against the inactivity epidemic, we need to invest in quality physical education. It can change the life of a young person.

How do I know it can change lives?

Because it saved mine.

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*Herschel Walker is the 1982 Heisman Trophy winner and played for the National Football League from 1986 to 1997. He is a member of Champions for America's Future, a national network of athletes and coaches that supports policy investments to improve educational and other opportunities for students.*

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