

Proposal

Athletic P.E. Exemption Option for SJUSD High School Students: Background, Analysis, and FAQ's

(Submitted to the SJUSD Board of Trustees by the Parent Engagement Group)
April, 2014

Background

After two years of discussion and research beginning in 2011, parents from several District high schools and middle schools met in early 2013 to discuss the benefits and feasibility of a student-centered option to allow at least part of the SJUSD two-year high school P.E. requirement to be satisfied by interscholastic sports participation, just as many public and most private high schools do across California. Members of our large group have consulted with students, SJUSD's Department of Teaching and Learning, the California Department of Education, University of California Admissions, a SJUSD athletic director, P.E. teachers, and counselors. We have also consulted with an Athletic Director and counselor from a California public high school that has successfully implemented an Athletic P.E. Exemption Option.

Our initial proposal in the spring of 2013 was not voted upon by our School Board because the proposal was referred to an *ad hoc* working group concurrently established to evaluate possible changes to high school graduation requirements. (Our proposal does *not* request a change to high school graduation requirements.) That working group later become inactive without making recommendations regarding any of the initiatives they were considering. Board action was further delayed pending the naming of a permanent superintendent. This proposal is now updated to include new data and our District's new Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) priorities.

Request for Prompt Vote by the SJUSD Board of Trustees

Because this proposal does *not* request a change to high school graduation requirements, because our parent group began discussions with our District's decision-makers three years ago, because we now have a permanent Superintendent, because our proposal is a tactic supporting multiple *District Strategic Plan* objectives and LCAP priorities, and because our current students should have the opportunity right away to register for courses and make choices that are more advantageous to their academic, college and career preparedness, extracurricular, financial, and health needs, we request that our proposal be immediately placed on the School Board agenda for a prompt School Board vote.

Continued on next page

Current P.E. Requirements in SJUSD High Schools

Two years of Physical Education are required of all SJUSD high school students. Required P.E. is scheduled for 9th and 10th grades. Currently no P.E. exemptions are granted for students who participate in sports.

What the California Department of Education Allows

The California Education Code gives school boards the discretion to utilize interscholastic athletics as an option for meeting the state's P.E. requirement (EC Section 51242). The Ed Code describes various P.E. exemptions, waivers, and independent study options available to school boards (EC Section 51241). The Ed Code gives school boards the authority to grant temporary credentialing to athletic coaches as long as some basic criteria are met, like knowledge of first aid (EC Section 5593).

Problems With the Current SJUSD P.E. Policy for High School Athletes

For many student athletes, most of whom are already strenuously exercising 15 hours a week for their team, the incremental educational value of 10th grade P.E. is minimal, and therefore an inefficient use of time and resources.

Given that the intent of P.E.'s physical exercise is met and far exceeded by sports participation, the incremental educational value of 10th grade P.E. class is very small, and therefore an inefficient use of the students' already scarce time and the schools' resources. The marginal student benefits of P.E. to those student athletes must be weighed against the much greater academic benefits of replacing the class with a course or opportunity that has much more educational value toward the individual student's graduation prospects, academic interests, college and career aspirations, or improves the student's health and social/emotional well-being. Although many student athletes enjoy the extra P.E. because it is “fun” and they “like having a class with no homework,” other student athletes find it “pointless,” and “not a good use of my time.” We need a more flexible option to fit the needs of more students.

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Requiring P.E. of a student athlete makes it even more difficult for those students to complete courses in time consuming and demanding academic and co-curricular programs.

Many students, both athletes and non-athletes, in a variety of challenging programs across our district--including AVID, AP, Band, Civitas, EPI, Honors, IB, Jr. ROTC, Student Government, etc.--have a difficult time taking all of their graduation requirements, satisfying UC's and CSU's A-G requirements and recommendations, taking enriching electives, staying emotionally and physically healthy, and/or balancing the needs of community and family in the traditional high school schedule. In order to satisfy all of the demands, most of those same students either have to take zero period starting as early as 6:49 a.m. (which means less sleep and proven detrimental effects to student achievement and health, and results in seven or even eight classes per day), all-day P.E. in SJUSD summer school (preventing summer learning opportunities that would actually help with credit recovery or college admissions, and often requiring transportation to schools far from home), private summer school (at great financial burden for some and inaccessible to most), and are often told they may need to take the required Health class online (at a cost of about \$300). English language learners and disadvantaged students in special academies and programs are particularly burdened by the current policy.

For student athletes who are struggling or underperforming in one or more academic classes, the current policy sets the wrong priority and misallocates resources.

Many student athletes, including some who are English language learners or financially disadvantaged, struggle in one or more academic classes and do not have time in the impacted schedules of Freshman and Sophomore year for necessary intervention, tutoring, credit recovery, or other support for academic success. If these already physically active student athletes did not need to take Sophomore P.E., they would have additional time and opportunity in their schedules for academic help. With only 7% of our District's students identified as ready for college math (according to the Early Assessment Placement tests), nearly half of our District's students failing algebra and geometry courses, as well as many receiving F's and D's in other graduation and college required courses, requiring the second year of P.E. for a struggling student athlete creates a barrier to academic support services and results in misallocated resources and missed opportunities for help.

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The current policy does not recognize or support interscholastic sports participation as a powerful way for high school students to connect to their school.

Participation in interscholastic sports is an effective and popular way for students to become and stay connected to their school. As recent data have shown, school connectedness is a very important indicator of student success and graduation rates. In addition, being a part of a sports team is a great way to develop and apply the necessary Common Core skills of collaboration, teamwork, perseverance, grit, and self-discipline.

The existing policy often necessitates excessive physical exertion from the combined P.E. class and sports, which can be unhealthy and lead to overuse injuries and insufficient energy for homework.

Most students in team sports rigorously exercise two to four hours per day, weekend and holiday workouts are not uncommon, and weekend competitions can last all day. A swimmer, for example, who is strenuously exercising two hours after school each day does not need or benefit from a third hour of cardiovascular exercise. In fact, the third (or even fifth) hour of physical exercise in P.E. can be excessive for some, leaving them vulnerable to exhaustion and overuse injury. At block schools, with their 92-minute periods, the extra P.E. class can add up to five and a half hours of total exercise every school day, and can therefore be even more detrimental. The four to five and a half hours of strenuous exercise can leave students too tired for the considerable homework awaiting them at home.

When it comes to California public university admissions, the current policy puts SJUSD high school student athletes at a competitive disadvantage compared to student athletes who received P.E. exemptions.

The UC and CSU systems consider only A-G courses. The more A-G courses and the higher the grades, the better chances for admission. P.E. is not an A-G course and therefore it has no value in a UC or CSU application. Requiring 10th grade P.E. of our student athletes, when the Ed Code says we don't have to and while many other high schools don't, crowds out the opportunity for our students to take another A-G class which would actually help them with college admissions. With only 5.4% of SJUSD graduates attending UC schools, 11% attending CSU schools, and only 33% of our graduations completing A-G requirements, our District should implement policies that support academic success and improve admissions to California's public universities.

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The current policy does not support sports participation as a viable path to college acceptance and affordability for some students.

The current policy does not seem to recognize the changing and increasing role that student sports participation can play in the college admissions and affordability process. Interscholastic sports can provide avenues for college acceptance and scholarship/aid for students who might not otherwise obtain them.

The existing policy creates a barrier to enrollment in offered academic classes or innovative electives, which could inhibit academic success and social/emotional well-being for students, as well as suppress demand for teachers of those subjects.

For many student athletes, there simply isn't enough time or opportunity to take innovative electives or other classes they'd like from our SJUSD teachers. Furthermore, many students resort to taking classes from private institutions, either online or summer school, if they can afford it.

The current policy undermines achievement of, and diverts resources away from, multiple new statewide LCAP priorities.

The current P.E. policy:

- does not support* student outcomes of increased college attendance;
- does not support* pupil achievement;
- does not support* A-G completion and college preparedness;
- does not support* increasing the share of English language learners who become English proficient;
- does not support* increasing the share of pupils who pass early assessment tests; and
- does not support* increased access to Honors/AP classes.

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PROPOSAL

In accordance with the California Education Code, and using the models from Livermore High School and Granada High School as a starting point, we propose that the SJUSD Board of Trustees develop a student-centered policy that directs high schools to grant a P.E. Exemption Option to 10th grade students who participate in interscholastic sports. The exemption is allowed for up to two semesters of the 10th grade P.E. requirement. As long as students fulfill the criteria outlined by the Board and written in the Student Agreement Contract, the student's transcript will show a five-credit Athletic P.E. Exemption "class" (often 7th period) for the semester in which he or she is participating in an after-school sport. Those student athletes taking the Exemption Option will then have flexibility to eliminate the need for zero period or summer school P.E, enroll in other required or elective classes, or receive extra academic support, consistent with the best interests of the student, and with guidance from the counselor. Student athletes who want to enroll in 10th grade P.E. will still have that option.

This proposal puts student academic and health benefits at the center of the education policy, it supports multiple LCAP priorities and *District Strategic Plan* objectives, it is modeled after other schools' programs in order to facilitate easier and quicker implementation by our District, and it does not need to result in any P.E. teacher layoffs. We welcome and would like to participate in discussion of any necessary staff-generated modifications to our proposal that provide the same student benefits outlined in this document.

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Benefits to Students of the Proposed Athletic P.E. Exemption Option

- *Gives students more opportunities for graduation requirement classes, enriching electives, A-G requirements, Honors and AP classes, college-recommended classes, special academy classes, academic support, learning English, study period, more sleep, engaging extracurricular activities, needs of family and community, and summer demands, all specific to their personal plans for college/career success and social/emotional well-being. The increased student benefits come without sacrificing any physical fitness, and in fact may encourage more physical fitness by supporting team sports and academics at the same time. Student athletes who want to take 10th grade P.E. still have that option.
- *Provides better chances for SJUSD student athletes to gain admission into California's public universities, without compromising student physical fitness.
- *Recognizes and supports the importance of interscholastic sports as meaningful school engagement and connectedness, and as a viable path for many students toward college admissions and financial/scholarship aid.
- *Makes more room in the regular schedule for innovative support for Sophomore student athletes who may be struggling academically, but who want to remain connected to their school through interscholastic sports.
- *Allows many students and families to save money by having more opportunity in their schedule to take required graduation and college-required classes at school, rather than having to pay hundreds of dollars to private online courses or summer school.
- *Preserves summer as an opportunity for students to pursue academic interests, credit recovery, work part time, explore careers through community service, take a family vacation, etc.
- *Improves equal access to special programs by making enrollment in them *not* dependent on the family's ability to pay for online courses or private summer school, or provide additional transportation to summer school campuses far from home.
- *Strikes an appropriate balance between physical activity and academic work, so that students can perform better in both.

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Benefits to Our District of the Proposed Athletic P.E. Exemption Option

*Demonstrates that our District puts students' academic success and social/emotional well-being at the forefront of its policy.

*Supports multiple LCAP priorities and *District Strategic Plan* objectives.

*Provides more time for innovative academic support and tutoring for struggling students, some of whom are English language learners and/or financially disadvantaged, to get the support they need, remain engaged in interscholastic sports, stay in school, graduate, and go to college.

*Supports and strengthens our District's most demanding and time-consuming educational programs and academies as student athletes' schedules will have more room to include them. Furthermore, enrollment on those special programs will not be as heavily dependent upon extra financial resources from home and so may accommodate more students from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds.

*Gives our high schools a distinct competitive marketing advantage over neighboring districts' high schools. Effective marketing and word-of-mouth communication of this student-centered option may attract scholar athletes from adjacent districts and therefore increase enrollment.

*Offers students who currently take a wide range of courses from private institutions, either online or summer school classes, the opportunity to take them at their SJUSD high school once there is room in their schedule; therefore enrollment in those classes may increase.

*Allows for small savings from fewer students needing to take SJUSD summer school P.E.

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Possible Philosophical Concerns

*Many physical education staff believe that P.E. is designed to teach more than physical fitness; it is also about physical education; therefore Sophomore students who don't take all of the P.E. requirements will miss out on such things as being exposed to new sports, exercise plans, and some physiology. They believe that standard P.E. classes are just as important as any other class and should not be marginalized.

Every class taught at our high schools has value, and it is appropriate for teachers to advocate for their subjects. We share the commitment to two years of Physical Education, as required by the Ed Code, as an integral part of SJUSD's education, which is why the Athletic P.E. Exemption should not be available for unqualified students. If students are not competing in interscholastic sports then they will receive the full physical fitness and health benefits from two years of P.E. Since for many student athletes the incremental educational value of P.E. is small, those students should have the option to make other choices that are actually advantageous to their academic, college/career, and health needs. These advantages are accomplished without sacrificing the student's physical fitness, and may actually improve the health and well-being of the student.

*But our District values P.E.

Our District should value P.E. and this proposal supports that value. In addition to P.E., our District values the arts, science, math, academic success, students' social/emotional well-being, graduation, going to college, and many other components of education, and individuals assign their own value and importance to those priorities. As a matter of education policy, however, the value of a course or policy should be determined by its use in achieving educational objectives and LCAP priorities. The minimal educational importance and complete lack of health benefits of 10th grade P.E. to a student who is already benefitting from 15 hours a week of exercise for the sport is of no value to achieving our District Strategic Plan objectives or LCAP priorities. Indeed, the current policy can be a barrier to taking classes or making choices that would have much greater value toward achieving those objectives and priorities.

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Frequently Asked Questions by Administrators and Teachers

How do other public high schools in California do it?

Many other public California high schools currently count a student's participation in after school sports for some or all of the two-year P.E. requirement, in accordance with the Ed Code. A popular Athletic P.E. Exemption Option is to require that all students take Freshman P.E., and in the Sophomore year allow the option of an Athletic P.E. Exemption for each semester that a student participates in an interscholastic sport, up to two semesters, as long as the student has passed five out of the six fitness gram skills. (Student contracts and forms from those schools are available online.) Most California private high schools, including Jesuit and St. Francis, do not require any P.E. if the student participates in sports.

How does the Athletic P.E. Exemption show up on the transcript?

There are different options. For example, the Livermore High School model has a 7th period Athletic P.E. Exemption “class” with five credits per semester. There is no grade.

What staff person is in charge of overseeing it?

Existing staff oversee the administration of the exemptions. For instance, in the Livermore model, the Athletic Director is listed as the teacher and oversees the administration. Other P.E. staff could also manage the administration.

What happens if the student gets cut from the team?

At other schools this has not been a problem because the Sophomores have more awareness of their athletic ability as it is usually their second year in the sport. Some sports are no-cut sports. Injuries do not cause the student to be cut from the team. If a student becomes ineligible for the exemption because he or she does not fulfill the Athletic P.E. Exemption Contract, then the A.D. and counselor will drop the student from the 7th period Athletic P.E. Exemption “class.” If there is no room in a zero period P.E. class then the students must take P.E. in the 11th grade. According to interviews, this only rarely happens.

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What about high schools with block schedules?

Administering the Athletic P.E. Exemption Option works for both regular and block high schools. Because block schools provide the opportunity for eight classes a year instead of the traditional six, it is possible that fewer student athletes who attend block schools will choose the Exemption Option in order to complete required courses. However, some block school student athletes will choose the P.E. Exemption because the additional 92 minutes of P.E. while students are already exercising two to four hours a day for their team is even more unnecessary and more unhealthy for those students.

How much additional administrative time will be required to set up the Athletic P.E. Exemption Option?

Athletic directors, counselors, and coaches will need some support in the beginning; however, the process has been straightforward and not burdensome at other schools.

Will this result in P.E. teacher lay-offs?

No P.E. teacher needs to be laid off. At the two high schools researched, not a single P.E. teacher has been laid off and the Athletic Department supports the new policy. According to one Athletic Director, roughly 25% of Sophomores at his school are taking the Exemption for at least one semester, but the rest of the P.E. classes are unaffected or increasing, and the P.E. class size in Sophomore P.E. is more manageable. Furthermore, the proposed Option will increase demand for teachers in other subjects.

Conclusion

The proposed Athletic P.E. Exemption Option is a student-centered, popular with parents, well researched, administratively feasible, cost saving, common sense approach to improving student academic success and health. It supports students' personal plans for achievement and college/career success, makes academic and sports programs more equitable and accessible, gives our District a competitive marketing advantage over neighboring districts, does not need to result in P.E. teacher layoffs, may increase demand for teachers in other subjects, can be easily copied from other high schools' models, is allowable by the California Department of Education, and it supports many components of the *District Strategic Plan* and LCAP priorities. Our students and parents have been discussing, researching, and proposing for the past three years, and now we request prompt consideration and a vote by our elected School Board. The Board's attention to this important matter is greatly appreciated.

Updated and submitted April 29th, 2014, by Joy Wake, Echopeak@comcast.net, Coordinator of the Parent Engagement Group, with contributions from parents from various District high schools.

