The President’s Challenge in the New Millennium

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Since its inception in 1956, the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (PCPFS) has consistently promoted increased physical activity and enhanced physical fitness. This paper reviews its original emphasis on youth, the inclusion of individuals of all ages, its cooperation with professional organizations, and the changes in its President’s Challenge Physical Fitness Awards Program. These events have sent different messages to the public about elements of physical activity and fitness. An evaluation of the current President’s Challenge has led to recommendations for increased emphasis on physical activity behavior.

The United States seems to express increased concern for the fitness of its youth during wartime. The government and professional organizations often cooperate to find ways to enhance youth fitness at these times. Although there may have been an underlying military theme, the establishment of the President’s Council on Youth Fitness (currently, the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports [PCPFS]) by President Eisenhower in 1956 was done in a relatively peaceful time and was primarily in response to an article by Kraus and Hirshland (1953) reporting that U.S. children had a higher failure rate than European youth on physical performance tests. In 1966, President Johnson established the Presidential Physical Fitness Award (PPFA) to motivate youth to improve their physical fitness and to recognize those youngsters who reach an exceptional level of achievement on a series of physical fitness test items. The PPFA was added to a series of awards promoted at this time by the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD).1

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1The three main sources for this paper are Park (1989), Spain (1995), and PCPFS President’s Challenge Physical Fitness Award Program (1998).
The council’s primary goal to promote increased physical activity and enhanced physical fitness for children and youth has been expanded through the years to include all ages. The evolution of the program’s content has placed varying emphases on elements of these goals. This paper will describe significant events and changes in the PCPFS and the President’s Challenge Physical Fitness Awards Program, indicating the different messages that these events have provided to the U.S. public.

Physical Fitness Is Important for Children and Youth

President Dwight D. Eisenhower established the President’s Council on Youth Fitness (PCYF) in 1956. The original council was a part of the president’s cabinet and consisted primarily of secretaries of governmental agencies (i.e., interior, defense, agriculture, labor, health, education, and welfare). A large citizen advisory committee (120 individuals) was named to assist the council. These actions were taken to emphasize the importance of youth fitness.

Physical Fitness Is Also Important for Adults

President John F. Kennedy was a strong and public advocate of physical activity and fitness. He changed the name of the PCYF to President’s Council on Physical Fitness in 1963 to include adult fitness and community recreation.

Strive for Excellence

President Lyndon B. Johnson included sports in the title of the PCPFS and established the Presidential Physical Fitness Award in 1966. Individual students were recognized for scoring at or above the 85th percentile on all of the fitness test items (seven at that time) on AAHPERD’s Youth Fitness Test. The clear emphasis was on achieving a high fitness level. It underscored a competitive theme in that it recognized an exceptional level of achievement and was added to the AAHPERD fitness test program, which continued its awards for performance at the 50th and 80th percentiles. The hope was that setting this high standard would encourage everyone to strive for excellence.

The PCPFS Promotes Fitness Test Developed by Physical Education Professionals

The PCPFS and AAHPERD worked together in many ways to develop fitness materials and tests and to promote fitness for all from the inception of the PCPFS. For example, the President’s Challenge Physical Fitness Award used the AAHPERD Youth Fitness Test battery until the mid-1980s.

Research Base for Physical Fitness

Park (1989) quoted many leaders from government, medicine, and physical education who called for more, better, and coordinated research in physical fitness. Many university physical education departments were promoting fitness research (e.g., T.K. Cureton, Jr. established the Physical Fitness Research Laboratory
at the University of Illinois in 1944). Dr. H. Harrison Clarke and his colleagues conducted a large school-based fitness study over many years. Starting in 1971, Dr. Clarke edited the *PCPFS Physical Fitness Research Digest*, which presented summaries of fitness research related to each of the fitness components.

**Regular Physical Activity Is Important for Adults**

The Presidential Sports Award, developed by the PCPFS in 1972, was based on doing regular physical activity and could be obtained regardless of individual skill or fitness level. The award was later expanded to include all ages, starting with 6-year-olds. Although its efforts were not widely recognized, the PCPFS led the way in what was to become a major emphasis in trying to motivate individuals to be active in the 1980s and 1990s.

**PCPFS Develops Physical Fitness Test**

After a failed attempt to combine elements of fitness testing and awards with AAHPERD, the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research (Fitnessgram), and PCPFS in the mid-1980s, the PCPFS developed its own fitness test in 1986. Renamed the President’s Challenge Physical Fitness Awards Program, this test used findings from the 1985 PCPFS National School Population Fitness Survey, expanded the age range to include 6–17, and differed from other test batteries by continuing with a performance item (i.e., shuttle run) and excluding body composition.

**Youth Who Are Above Average Should Receive Award**

The President’s Challenge, now a separate entity from AAHPERD and its award system, continued the Presidential Physical Fitness Award (85th percentile on all items). In 1988, the National Physical Fitness Award (50th percentile for each item) was added to the challenge.

**Youth Who Participate in Fitness Testing Should Be Recognized**

In 1991, the Participant Physical Fitness Award—presented to youth who attempted each test item but scored below the 50th percentile on one or more items—was added to the Challenge to encourage youth participation in fitness testing, even if scores for these individuals were below average on one or more items.

**Fitness Research Has Practical Implications for Health and Performance for a Variety of Populations**

The original *Research Digest* was discontinued in 1979. In 1993, the *PCPFS Physical Activity and Fitness Research Digest* was published quarterly, with corporate support provided as a public service and editing by Charles Corbin and Robert Pangrazi. Guest authors provided summaries of the role and relationship of physical activity and fitness to many health conditions and sports performance and for females and males of all ages and backgrounds.
The Best People to Promote Fitness Are Highly Visible Sports Figures

The PCPFS no longer has cabinet status. It now includes the council, whose members have been highly visible through the years in aspects of fitness, sports, or sports medicine. This 20-member council is appointed by the president and usually changes when a new president is elected, especially one from a different party. The council meets periodically, and council members are involved in a variety of physical fitness, sports events, and programs throughout the country. The PCPFS executive director, also appointed by the president, reports to the White House and to the secretary of Health and Human Services, and has a staff with backgrounds in a variety of areas related to physical activity, media, and management.

Health-Related Tests and Standards Should Be an Option

One of the major shifts in evaluation of fitness tests has been changing the standard from comparison with others (e.g., percentiles) to establishing health criteria for fitness test scores. Although being in the top percent is essential for elite athletic performance, the more important factor for most individuals is determining whether there is a "healthy" level of fitness components.

In 1996, the President's Challenge was changed to include the Health Fitness Award. This was based on health-related test items, including body composition and excluding agility, with criterion-referenced standards. Teachers and students now have the option of a fitness test (aerobic and muscular endurance, flexibility, and agility) with the presidential, national, and participant awards, as well as the health-related standards (aerobic endurance, muscular endurance, flexibility, and body composition).

Promotion of Fitness and Physical Activity Needs Continual Evaluation

Part of the reason for the various changes in the President's Challenge (as well as other fitness tests and awards) is the recognition that there is a need for regular and systematic evaluation based on research and expert opinion. In 1995, the PCPFS council appointed a workgroup to review the President's Challenge and make recommendations for its improvement and enhancement. Margaret J. Safrit was named chair of the workgroup. The executive director (Sandra Perlmuter), the director of research, planning, and special projects (Christine Spain), and senior program advisor (Don Franks) worked with the workgroup. The workgroup included three council members (Rockne Freitas, Judith Kieffer, and Amber Travsky), exercise/fitness scholars and professionals (Kirk Cureton, Cassandra Jones, Wendell Liemohn, Tim Lohman, Rainer Martens, Tom Rowland, Wynn Updyke, and Maureen Weiss), and a consultant (Robert Pangrazi).

Regular Physical Activity Is the Most Important Fitness Goal

The workgroup emphasized one of the common goals for the PCPFS, namely, to motivate individuals to begin and continue an active lifestyle.
Recognizing Activity Is the Best Motivation for Continuing Activity

The second basis for the workgroup’s recommendations is that the best way to motivate people to engage in regular physical activity is to recognize and reward physical activity behavior directly.

Workgroup Report Approved by PCPFS Council

In 1996, Margaret J. Safrit presented a report of the workgroup, recommending that the future President’s Challenge be based on recognition of physical activity behavior by children and youth. The council approved the report and encouraged the workgroup to complete its work.

Current Challenge: Four Options

The 1998–99 President’s Challenge Physical Fitness Awards Program includes four awards. The presidential (score in the 85th percentile on all test items), national (score in 50th percentile on all items), and participant (attempt all test items but score below 50th percentile on one or more) physical fitness awards are based on the following test items:

- Abdominal sit-ups, with partial curl-ups as an option
- Shuttle run
- 1-mile run/walk (1/4 mile for ages 6–7, 1/2 mile for ages 8–9)
- Pull-ups, with right-angle push-ups as an option
- V-sit reach, with sit-and-reach as an option

The Health Fitness Award (i.e., must meet health-criterion standards for each test item) is based on the following:

- Abdominal partial curl-ups
- 1-mile run/walk (1/4 mile for ages 6–7, 1/2 mile ages 8–9)
- Right-angle push-ups, with pull-ups as an option
- V-sit reach, with sit-and-reach as an option
- Body mass index (BMI)

The award for each option includes a patch and certificate, plus optional items.

Future Challenge

Although some children and youth respond positively to an emphasis on achieving high scores on physical fitness tests, this approach has some problems. The only presidential award currently available is limited to a very small percentage of participants (by definition, only a small percentage of individuals can score in the 85th percentile on all five test items). These individuals typically have a good genetic background and are usually the same people who receive recognition by excelling in athletic endeavors. While these high standards may motivate those who are close to the 85th percentile to work harder, it may also cause children and youth who cannot possibly gain that award to give up. Those with low percentile scores may be embarrassed and turn to inactive pursuits, compounding the
low fitness levels. These are some of the factors that caused the President’s Challenge workgroup to recommend an emphasis on physical activity behavior that can be achieved and recognized by all individuals, regardless of fitness or skill level.

Details of the new President’s Challenge are still in the development stage. The proposed program will be evaluated by students, parents, teachers, and other professionals. The final proposed program must then be approved by the PCPFS council and executive director before implementation.

The proposed physical activity program does represent a basic change in what should be recognized. It would honor and provide a Presidential Physical Activity Award for regular activity rather than fitness test scores. The type and amount of activity would be consistent with the Surgeon General’s report and recommendations for activity for children and youth. Students would select their own activities, keeping a log of time spent in each. A sponsoring adult (e.g., teacher, youth leader, parent) would verify the activity logs.

Finally, it is anticipated that there will be a transition period to allow schools and other agencies to phase in the new physical activity approach.

Concluding Remarks

Health, fitness, performance, and physical activity have been emphasized for many reasons (e.g., military readiness, elite athletic performance, reduction of health risks, quality of life, motivation for a healthy lifestyle). All of these are important, with different priorities at different times for the nation and for individuals.

Regular physical activity for a healthy base would seem to be an essential common denominator for all of these elements. It is therefore reasonable to emphasize an active lifestyle for all, regardless of fitness or skill level. This provides a wide range of options for individuals to pursue additional sport or other performance activities for physiological or psychological health, high levels of fitness, and sports performance at all levels.

We must clearly describe what is required for each of these elements of activity, fitness, and performance. Ongoing research and its evaluation are key elements for revised recommendations for the public. Our failure to clearly differentiate among activity, fitness, and performance has led to their being viewed as competitive elements from which one must choose, rather than complementary factors that build on each other.

The role of scholarly societies (e.g., to promote research), professional organizations (e.g., to provide materials and programs for professionals in the field based on the research), and governmental agencies such as the PCPFS (e.g., to work with organizations to promote activity and fitness) need to be clearly defined so that their supplementary efforts can cause the whole to be greater than the individual contributions.

The past record is mixed, with many examples of cooperation on a variety of projects yet little careful long-range planning on ways to achieve common goals. The differences of opinion about activity and fitness testing and awards have often led to confusion and fragmented programs rather than to a consensus and a comprehensive approach to the future.
References


