

The Arete School of Sport Culture and Wellness

By Joel Kirsch, founder, president and program director, American Sports Institute

This is about a school, a school unlike any other. What's an article about a school doing in the *Ultimate Sports Guide*? When you're done reading this, you'll be able to answer that question.

The Bay Area-based nonprofit American Sports Institute is in the process of creating The Arete School of Sport Culture and Wellness, which will be unlike any other school. Arete, pronounced (ar-uh-tay), is a Greek word that means virtue and excellence in an integrated and balanced physical, mental, spiritual way. It represented the body-mind-spirit orientation of the ancient Greeks at the height of the Athenian era 2,500 years ago, and is still prevalent in Greek culture today.

The tuition-free, privately funded, community-based Arete School will use the principles and practices that work in sport culture, physical education and wellness to generate high academic scores, high health and fitness scores and high motivation scores for all its students, including those from disadvantaged families.

Rather than students sitting at desks most of the day, as is the case with schools everywhere, physical activity will be at the center of the curriculum, and the academic subjects of math, language arts, science, social studies, world languages and the arts will be built around the physical activity.

The Arete School will serve as a model for transforming America's public school system and will be a resource and training center for educators across the country and around the world.

Why is the American Sports Institute creating The Arete School? As you may already know, America's public school system is in trouble. The national dropout rate for high-school students is 30 percent. For Latinos and African Americans, it's 45 percent to 50 percent. The dropout rate in America's 50 largest cities is 48 percent. In addition, one-third of high school students graduate without the skills necessary to be successful at work or in college. For all high school students, 75 percent are chronically disengaged in their academic courses. These kids drop out mentally.

On top of all this, there is a crisis in childhood obesity. Approximately one-third of America's youth are either

overweight or obese, and 20 percent of 4-year-olds are not just overweight but obese.

What's the price we're paying for these school and health problems? Over the course of their lifetimes, each graduating (or not graduating) class is costing America \$500 billion to \$600 billion annually in direct and indirect costs, and this has been going on for decades.

Why all the problems? Because the answers to solving America's public school and health concerns have not, do not and will not come from education, but from neuroscience (or brain research), evolutionary studies and medicine.

How so? Research shows that over millions of years of evolution, human beings have been genetically programmed to engage in sustained high levels of physical activity. We've known for quite some time that physical activity is good for our bodies, but recent and emerging research is telling us that exercise is also good for our brains. Physical activity actually nourishes the brain cells we already have and helps grow new ones, even into our senior years. This helps us be smarter than we otherwise would be, and plays a major role in preventing or slowing the process of dementia. If we're not physically active, not only do our bodies deteriorate, but so do our brains. The body and brain are inextricably linked, and "use it or lose it" is very real.

The ancient Greeks knew this instinctually, and so did great figures throughout history. Henry David Thoreau once wrote, "It seems when my legs begin walking, my mind begins working ... any writing I do sitting down is wooden." In the same context, Soren Kierkegaard said, "I have walked myself into my best thoughts." From Kahlil Gibran: "It is slavery to live in the mind unless it has become part of the body." Putting this in perfect

context, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote, "By too much sitting still, the body becomes unhealthy, and soon the mind." And in the biggest context of all, Leonardo da Vinci believed the workings of the human body to be an analogy for the workings of the universe.

Confirming what the ancient Greeks and great figures knew, in a more-recent educational context, numerous studies over the past 35-40 years have shown that kids



A focus on body-brain activities help faces glow in the firstPASS program at Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy.

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who are healthy and physically fit perform better academically than their unfit counterparts, and their behavior is better. Pretty powerful stuff.

In addition, from medicine we've learned that the two ends of our chromosomes must stay strong to protect our DNA and keep us from becoming ill, especially with chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer. If these chromosome ends, called "telomeres," become weak, then our DNA is subject to toxins in the body, which eventually leads to these and other diseases. Physical activity is the most important factor in keeping our telomeres strong and our bodies healthy.

What does all this have to do with our public schools and schoolchildren? Our educational models put students sitting in a classroom first, and only give passing interest to physical activity. Everyone knows that. But the human model, from a neuroscientific, historical, evolutionary, medicinal perspective, calls for kids and adults — all of us! — to be physically active most of the time. As professor Philip Holmes, a neuroscientist at the University of Georgia, put it in a 2010 Time magazine article, "It occurs to us that exercise is the more normal or natural condition, and that being sedentary is really the abnormal situation."

The crazy thing about all this is that study after study affirms this perspective. Since 1989, through our educational programs, the American Sports Institute has proven this. And, as we have seen, the ancient Greeks practiced this. Great figures throughout history have known this. Studies over the past 35-40 years have confirmed this. Current and emerging research is validating this and explaining in detail how it all happens.

So the bottom line in all this is: There is a great divide between current educational models and the human model. Our schools are telling the kids to sit down and be quiet. However, nature, our genes and DNA, and evolution are telling us to stand up and get moving. This means that the sobering dropout rate, the sad rate of disengagement in the classrooms and the debilitating chronic diseases that



Above: A great mix of kids in the American Sports Institute's first-PASS body-brain program at Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy elementary school in San Francisco. Left: Students and teachers started every school day with aerobic activity at the former Coulterville-Greeley school.

include diabetes, heart disease, cancer and dementia are not problems, but rather, symptoms of a problem. The problem is we sit too much and are not physically active enough, and through these related symptoms, our schoolchildren are crying out to us to change things, but we keep doing the same things over and over again, and this has been going on for over half a century.

Despite what most people think today, including the majority of those in education, as study after study has proven, if approached in the appropriate way, sport, physical education and wellness — all manifested through physical activity — provide the answers to many of the problems in America's public schools. In fact, at the American Sports Institute, we believe that, if approached in the appropriate way, sport, physical education and wellness provide a way to realize our full potential as individuals, to deal constructively with social and international concerns, to expedite the evolutionary process of our species and, as children of the cosmos, for the universe to experience and be conscious of itself through us.

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