

Positive Youth Development through an After School Strength Training Program

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### Abstract

Positive youth development among middle and high school students and student-athletes will be taught through the implementation of a strength training program. The program will consist of time periods for school sponsored sport teams as well as an open training session that will be for students who do not participate in any sport. The time periods will coincide with the most dangerous time of day for teenagers when many problem behaviors occur. The idea behind the program will be to introduce and develop positive character traits among the participants as well as achieve the daily recommendations of physical activity. The program will be evaluated based upon its effectiveness of keeping problem behavior low in the school and community settings. Athletic leadership and positive character will also be achieved through participation. Participants will undergo positive youth develop in the physical, cognitive, and social areas.

## Positive Youth Development through an After School Strength Training Program

### **Introduction**

Using effective means of positive youth development, West Iron County Schools will create and maintain a strength training program in order to help empower youth and elevate positive characteristics and decision making among its student-athletes and the general student population. The program will follow three characteristics that Roth (2004) believes are necessary for any youth develop program: program goals, program atmosphere, and program activities (p. 4). Each of the three categories will be discussed in detail.

The program will be structured to help all students within the West Iron County Schools community, not just its athletes. The program, termed Wykon Weight Training, will be focused on promoting physical activity while developing positive character traits and abilities. Although the program will have ties to the athletic teams of the school, it will not center solely on student-athletes. The major focus is to offer an opportunity to engage in physical activity for both student-athletes and the students who may not participate in athletics.

### **Community Context**

West Iron County Schools and its athletic department will create, organize, and run a weight training program to accommodate students in middle and high school who possess various abilities. Not only will athletes be encouraged to attend for sport purposes, but also there will be an opportunity for any current student to attend and be a part of the program. The program will be named Wykon Weight Training after the school's nickname. The program will be conducted year round, other than during holidays and mandatory MHSAA dead periods.

The program will be broken into time slots to allow for maximization of the use of the facility. Athletic teams will be given certain periods as well as an “open” weight room for non-athletes.

Currently the fitness facility within the school is rather poor and in disrepair. Many upgrades will need to be made to the equipment and structure of the facility. In order to keep a safe environment, certain equipment will need to be replaced and other equipment repaired. The facility will be expanded to support more individuals participating at once. Please see Figure 1 to see a picture representation of the current facility and Figure 2 to see a sketch of what the facility may look like after improvements are made.

The youth that attend West Iron County Schools range in socioeconomic status with the majority falling between the low and middle stratification. As of the 2012 school year, 59% of students in kindergarten through twelfth grade receive free or reduced lunch (K. Busakowski, personal communication, November 26, 2012). The main professions around the community include blue collar jobs such as logging, construction, manufacturing, and retail sales. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012) the unemployment rate of Iron County where West Iron County Schools is located as of September 2012 was 7.1% which had dropped from its latest peak at 14.3% in March 2010. It is necessary to note that there are two school districts within Iron County. West Iron County Schools makes up an estimated 60% of the overall county population. Activities for youth at the middle and high school ages within the community are very scarce. Currently, there are no community centers or youth activity programs that offer a chance to participate in physical activity for this age group. Other than organized sports or a rare occasion where youth organize an activity, there are no other opportunities for youth to be active in an organized and supervised setting.

### **Purpose and Goals**

The purpose of Wykon Weight Training is to allow a place where student-athletes and the general student population are able to train and learn about a healthy and appropriate physical activity. The American College of Sports Medicine (2011) recommends 30-60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity most days of the week. Wykon Weight Training will meet these physical activity requirements by promoting physical activity through a structured resistance training program. Most everybody is capable of performing resistance training; therefore, resistance training is a great way to achieve the recommended daily amount of physical activity.

The following goals will be achieved through the implementation of the program:

- Promote physical activity and enhance physical activity opportunities in a safe and structured environment.
- Offer strength training advice and encouragement to meet recommended physical activity guidelines.
- Increase health and fitness levels through regular participation.
- Increase self-esteem and self-concept through regular participation.
- Create positive decision making ability.
- Develop positive character traits among participants.

Meeting the stated goals while promoting physical activity and character development will help develop children in a way that is not always acquired elsewhere. According to Larson (2004), after school programs “may be particularly useful in allowing adolescents to develop positive skills such as ‘initiative’ and the ‘ability to set and achieve goals’” (as cited in Gould, n.d.a). The

overall goal of this program is to promote positive youth development through the use of physical activity and self-improvement.

In order to meet and exceed the program's goals, each participant will be held accountable for his/her actions and decisions. Gambone and Connell (2004) offer the following advice on how students can achieve program goals:

First, they must learn to be productive. Adolescents need to do well in school, establish outside interests, and acquire basic life skills. Second, they must learn to establish connections with adults in their families and community, with their peers in positive and supportive ways, and with something larger than themselves, be it religious or civic.

Finally, they must learn to navigate – to chart and follow a safe course. Navigating takes multiple forms including interacting appropriately in their multiple worlds (their peer groups, families, schools, social groups and neighborhoods); transitioning from being taken care of to taking care of others; and managing the lures of unhealthy and dangerous behaviors (p. 18).

Helping the students learn and follow the plan will hopefully lead to the positive outcomes that are aimed to be achieved through Wykon Weight Training. However, this path must be taught to the participants as well as the leaders must guide the participants until they are capable of making positive decisions on their own. It is important to remember that character is not caught, but taught, in sport, exercise, and physical activity settings (Weinberg & Gould, 2007, p. 557). The program is a process and will take some time to fully empower each participant.

### **Program Structure**

During the school year, Wykon Weight Training will be open Monday through Thursday once the school day is completed. If school is cancelled for the day, Wykon Weight Training will be cancelled as well. An open training room will be available from 3:00 – 4:15 P.M. each day the program is scheduled to be open. This time is for any students that are not athletes in middle and high school. The riskiest part of the day for youth is between 2:00 and 6:00 PM because most parents are still at work and the children are left unsupervised (Coatworth & Conroy, 2007, p.58). Having the facility open for non-athletes after school, combined with the fact that practices typically occur in this timeframe will allow a safe activity for the students to participate during this dangerous time period. After 4:15, the training facility will be broken up into one-hour time slots for certain sport groups. In-season sport teams will only use the facility twice per week while out-of-season teams will train three or four days per week depending on the demands of the sport. During the summer, the training facility will be open Monday through Thursday for a two hour block in the morning as well as a two hour block in the evening for non-athletes. The other time slots will be divided up among all sport teams.

The specific groups that will use the training program include athletic teams such as football, boys/girls basketball, volleyball, boys/girls track and field, boys/girls tennis, and boys/girls golf. The non-athlete groups will be broken into middle school students, freshmen and sophomore students, and junior and senior students, however, they will all use the same “open” time slots. Each group will have a specific training plan to perform which will be created by sport coaches or training staff. The training program will be designed to meet certain training goals for the sport. The non-athletes will be given a more general training plan to build overall muscular strength and endurance. The middle school age group will work mostly on

building muscular endurance and agility through a training circuit format. The high school groups, freshmen/sophomores and juniors/seniors, will engage in a number of different training formats throughout the program that will challenge them physically in muscular strength and endurance ideas. All sport team members will be encouraged to train during their team's time frame. Reaching approximately 50% of the remaining students (non-athletes) would be considered a success. Obviously, it would be excellent to see this number grow as the program gains popularity.

The program will be staffed by each sport coach during their specific training session. The open training room for non-athletes will be staffed primarily by volunteers at this point. These volunteers will need to have knowledge of training programs and also positive youth development. In order to gain knowledge, training opportunities will be offered based on available resources. Background checks will be done on all volunteers that do not have a permanent role or job within the school system.

All staff members will set a positive example for the youth involved. This will occur during time spent at the facility as well as time outside of the facility in the community. In order to build positive character traits among the participants, the staff will need to set an appropriate example to be followed. Training opportunities will be available to help educate staff on theories behind positive youth development as well as proper methods of resistance training. At the onset of the program, the training sessions will be free or at the staff members' expense. With the aid of possible future finances, some training may be able to be paid for by the program's account.



The training facility needs to be upgraded quite dramatically over the course of the next few years (see figure 2). The price associated with the upgrade and expansion is rather expensive based upon the current school, athletic, and training facility budgets. The current figures amount to roughly \$9,000 to construct walls and add rubber matting to the expanded portion. When it is time to order equipment, another \$10,000 - \$15,000 will need to be raised to purchase eight half power racks and related accessories. Some current equipment such as Olympic bars and weights will be kept and used with the new racks. The school woodshop class will construct platforms to be used for full body explosive exercises in which the materials will need to be purchased at the going rate. Eventually, a new set of dumbbells and barbells will be purchased with range in price from \$1.09 per pound for dumbbells to around \$2,000 for a set of barbells with a rack. This will be an ongoing upgrade, so more equipment and materials will need to be added at a later time. What has been discussed is the current plan of action at this time.

In order to fund the purchase of all of the equipment, fundraisers will need to be performed. The school district does not have extra funds in the budget to supply many if any new equipment purchases. Throughout the year, fundraisers such as a golf tournament, semi-formal dinner, spaghetti feeds, and various youth sport tournaments will be conducted in order to raise money. Each fundraiser will be conducted with the goal to raise a sizeable amount of money at one time in order to maximize results of the work performed.

### **Positive Youth Development**

The idea behind providing an after school strength training program is to allow for students to engage in a safe and structured program that will enhance positive self-

characteristics. Not only will individual fitness levels be increased, but also qualities such as character, integrity, personal and social responsibility, a positive future orientation, and others will be emphasized. Dan Gould (n.d.b), the director of the Institute of the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University defines positive youth development as “the development of psychological attributes and dispositions and specific skills.” In a sport setting, positive youth development includes “learning positive health habits and becoming physically fit.” This definition connects the aspects that will be achieved by those participating in the Wykon Weight Training program. The program will focus on training aspects for both athletes and non-athletes. Although the training plans may differ among each group, the message behind the program will stay the same for each participant. Every participant will be taught how to improve and use personal qualities such as character, integrity, responsibility, and also have goals for the future through the agonist of strength training. Training is similar to life as you need to work hard while training in order to be successful. The message will be related to actions that will most likely be needed by these participants throughout their lives.

Programs with a positive youth development orientation often allow for proper life choices in the future. The National Clearing House on Families and Youth (2007), believe that young members of the community need positive youth development as follows:

The reality is that youth have talents and needs that communities can no longer afford to ignore. When we fail to provide youth with support and opportunities, as adults they may experience unemployment, have drug or alcohol problems, commit crimes, and become a drain on community resources. When young people are nurtured by caring adults, are given opportunities to become involved in education or work that builds

their skills, are supported and protected during challenging times, and are actively engaged in community activities, they become valuable contributors to the quality of community life. (para. 3)

It is important to understand that a quality program can shape the lives of young adults through the physical, cognitive, and social training that will be offered during training sessions.

A quality program that aims to teach life skills and character development will need quality instructors and trainers. A program needs to provide opportunities for positive youth development through appropriate instruction. The connection between an adult leader and a youth participant occurs in various ways. Smith and Stoll (2002) claim that “coaches influence the effects that sport participation has on children through the interpersonal behaviors they engage in, the values and attitudes they transmit both verbally and through example, and the goal priorities they establish (for example, winning versus equal participation and fun).

Coaches not only occupy a critical position in the athletic setting, but their influence can extend into other areas of the child's life as well” (p. 211). This connection is also important when it comes to the structure and instruction as a participant does not develop simply by attending, but by having proper structure and instruction. Larson, Eccles, and Gootman (2004) list eight features to promote positive youth development: physical and psychological safety, clear and consistent structure and appropriate supervision, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill building, and the integration of family, school, and community efforts (Table 2.1, p. 9). Using these eight features will provide an environment to help reach the multiple goals of Wykon Weight Training. The program will be physically and psychologically safe by monitoring all

activities and teaching the proper training methods using safe and acceptable methods. Each training plan will be structured for the appropriate age group (middle school, high school, specific athletic teams) and monitored for accuracy by on-duty staff. Signs will be clearly posted as to the expectations of participation in the training program and the expectations will be enforced. Staff members will create positive relationships with all of the participants, encouraging individual effort and achievement. Support will also be encouraged and required among peers. All students will be given an opportunity to participate as long as expectations are followed. In general, at-risk students of the school will be a major focus group encouraged to participate whether they are athletes or non-athletes. This will provide a great opportunity to belong in the school setting and hopefully build confidence within the school setting. Social norms will be structured as they would outside of school in the community. Personal and social responsibility will be required. Every participant will have the opportunity to become empowered with the decisions and choices made about their actions. Through guided development, these choices and actions will become standard decisions outside of the program. Skill building will be a major component as the participants are not only learning physical skills, but also social skills. They will learn how to be socially responsible while engaging in the program. Finally, we will connect school athletics, school and national physical activity guidelines, and community contexts throughout the program. The idea is to connect what is gained through Wykon Weight Training and put it to use throughout the school and community. A secondary goal will be to encourage friends and family members to engage in physical activity and behaviors at home.

Program leaders are the most integral part of positive youth development. They are the individuals that will conduct proper behaviors and build resources for the students to use outside of the program. Wykon Weight Training aims to teach personal and social responsibility through a structured strength training program. In order to fully teach responsibility, Hellison (2000) states that the program follows four basic ideas:

- It's relational. If the program leader cannot establish and maintain a relationship with students that honors their ability to take responsibility, nothing else will matter.
- It starts with a focus on physical activity and gradually shifts to an emphasis on life. The major message is not necessarily to maintain an active lifestyle throughout life but to live a personally and socially responsible life that prioritizes human decency and self-development.
- The responsibility for planning and carrying out the program gradually shifts from the program leader to the kids.
- Everything else, as they say, 'is details.' That includes how to develop relationships, how to teach about life through physical activity, and how to empower students. (p. 36)

Following these four basic ideas will help develop the responsibility needed to be positive members of the community. The kids will feel empowered and able to make positive decisions that will not only affect themselves, but also those around them. Leadership qualities may even be developed or enhanced for use among athletic teams or future leadership roles. On the contrary, leaders need to understand best practices for youth development. O'Donoghue (2006) makes the case that adult leaders need to adapt to youth participation in a program just as much, if not more, than the youth do. In order to accomplish this adaptation, leaders need

continual training in how to support youth and how to engage youth as allies to adults in order to foster successful youth and adult partnerships. To be successful, adults may need to change their perspective of how to positively work with youth to create a partnership (p. 5).

Ultimately, the leaders and staff of the program need to build leaders of the participants in order to help empower the youth. Empowered youth in the program are most likely going to make positive choices and actions outside of the program.

In order to offer a safe alternative to unsupervised time at home, the program will be designed to offer an opportunity for everyone to participate in an activity during the dangerous time of 2:00 – 6:00 PM. The activity may be an athletic team practice or a strength training session. This will lessen the amount of time a student will have at home unsupervised when the lack of supervision may lead to negative behaviors such as drinking alcohol, tobacco use, drug use, sexual intercourse, among others (Coatsworth and Conroy, 2007, p. 58). Instead of engaging in negative behaviors, positive alternatives will be provided while engaging in Wykon Weight Training. The program will provide proper supervision and clear structure which will help those participants transfer what they are learning to help make positive choices about their actions after school.

It is interesting to note that Seefeldt and Ewing (1997) and Shields and Bredemeier (1995) state that participants in organized sport are less likely to engage in delinquent behavior (as cited in Weinberg and Gould, 2007, p. 558). Four reasons Weinberg and Gould (2007) believe that sport participants engage in less negative behavior are differential association meaning less contact with those who engage in harmful behaviors, social bonding with those who possess positive characteristics, labeling hypothesis stating that an athlete is perceived as

a positive member of society, and economic strain that allows impoverished youth to feel as if they are able to have a high standard of living (p. 559). The idea behind this theory involving organized sport could connect to participation in the organized structure of Wykon Weight Training. Regular participation in the program is very similar to participating in organized sport with the outcomes hoping to be relatively similar. The idea being that organized physical activity will have the same support and structure as organized sport that will lead to the same outcomes.

### **Program Evaluation**

In order to be accountable for creating, structuring, and improving a youth centered program, proper evaluation must occur. Proper evaluation of the program can lead to the correct steps in program planning and improvement. Specific evaluation of the Wykon Weight Training program will be done in multiple ways. In order to effectively evaluate, the specific aspects or outcomes to be evaluated need to be determined (Izzo, Connell, Gambone, and Bradshaw, 2004, p. 303). The specific outcomes of Wykon Weight Training to be measured will be as follows:

- Increased physical activity among middle and high school students.
- Increased positive character traits among participants.
- Positive behavior in the school setting and community.
- Positive leadership among athletic team members.

In order to measure each outcome, evaluation will be conducted short term and long term whereas the overall contributions will be studied longitudinally as to the overall effectiveness of the program. Measurements in the short term will include surveys and questionnaires while

long term measurements will include behavioral trends in school and the community. Short term measurements will be conducted monthly while long term will be based upon a sequence of monthly reports.

In order to measure the effectiveness of community trends, delinquent behavioral reports of middle and high school youth in the community will be studied as to the specific day of the week and also the time the issue occurred. Hopefully, delinquent behavior between the hours of 2:00 – 6:00 PM will subside with the implementation of the strength training program. In addition to the dangerous afternoon period, problem behavior in general will hopefully recede among program participants.

Wykon Weight Training will evaluate the main goal of promoting physical activity through informal surveys questioning the participant's engagement of daily physical activity. In addition, observation methods will be used to judge character and behavioral traits during the school day. Alternative forms of evaluation to judge behavior can be achieved through school referral reports. Behaviors outside of the school setting will be judged based on legal issues among regular participants. With the hope that at-risk students become involved in the program, the goal will be to help them engage in positive behaviors outside of school. This will be measured based upon ramifications of the legal system.

The impact of improvement among athletes will also be measured. Leadership roles and positive behaviors will be observed among all athletic teams. Although not every member of a team can be considered a captain, leadership characteristics by all athletes will be expected. The hope is to build leadership qualities in order to use in the community or later in life. Surveys will be given to each sport team's athletes to measure the effectiveness of the



training methods used as they relate to the given sport and also the effectiveness of the positive youth development received.

### **Conclusion**

Through proper fundraising and leadership, Wykon Weight Training will be implemented in order to serve community youth with an opportunity to reach recommended daily physical activity guidelines and also build positive characteristics during a dangerous daily time period. The ideas and traits acquired through the program will transfer to athletic and life events as well as to the overall development of the student or student-athlete participating in the program. The full renovation of the facility will take multiple years to complete, but the program will begin immediately. The participants will have an opportunity to help upgrade the facility with their support which will also allow an ownership stake in creating something new. Leaders will teach appropriate exercises and personal traits through the realm of strength training to develop physically, cognitively, and socially. Overall, the program will be a success if the program reaches multiple types of students and student-athletes, positive behavior is witness in the school and community settings, and the participants achieve a level of positive youth development.

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Appendix A  
West Iron County High School Fitness Center

Figure 1  
Picture representation of the current training facility at West Iron  
County High School.



Appendix B  
Updated Facility Layout

Figure 2  
Blueprint of the renovation plans after full facility upgrade at West Iron County High School.

