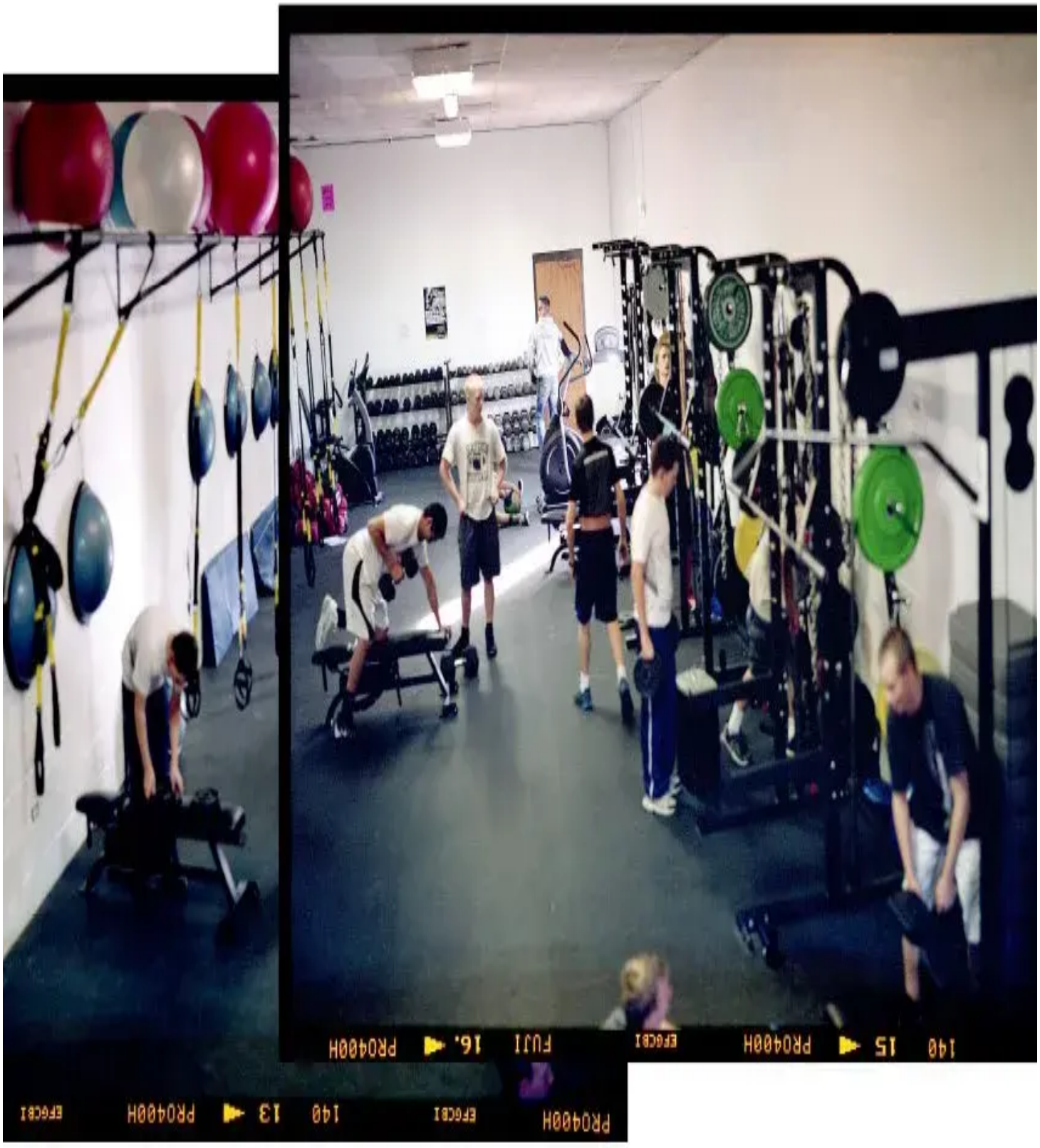
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Mountains of Challenges

Delta School Board Member Tammy Smith Explores Boundaries of PE

Editor's Note: *Tammy Smith has been a board member for Delta County Schools since 2009. The 5,000-student district is spread over 1,157 square miles in the west-central mountains, encompassing fairly isolated communities like Delta, Hotchkiss and Cedaredge. Smith is a lifelong resident and owns a small business in Hotchkiss. She went to the then-Mesa College (now Colorado Mesa University) on a basketball scholarship and has coached school athletic teams.*

Do you feel children's physical fitness is part of a school district's responsibility?

I think to a certain extent it is. The problem is I feel like it's more expected now from parents that the school districts do all of this rather than take responsibility at home. I think the direction we're going is really good; we're going towards children having a more active life. By overhauling our PE program we're explaining more to kids why you should be fit and eat well and have good exercise with that. With the education part of it, as far as leading a healthier life, I think that is the school district's responsibility because a lot of kids are not going to get that at home.

Do you feel some parents are kind of giving things up to the school that they don't have time or energy for?

I think there's just an expectation that parents expect the school to teach their kids everything; or they don't have time at home because they are working two jobs or may be single parents. So I think they put a lot more on school districts and expect

a lot more out of them, and I think PE or physical activity is just one of those things.

Describe your district in terms of its student size and geographic size.

We have about 5,000 kids, and those kids are in about five communities over 110 square miles. We have four high schools; we have a charter school; we actually have a Montessori school and a technical college in our district. So we're pretty unique. [We have] two really small high schools and one really big high school. The demographic population is different in each of those communities. At the bigger school, it has a larger Hispanic population so we have to find a way to incorporate things for all kids. We have soccer teams that are all-county teams, rather than doing away with a program that a kid might be interested in.

Because it's pretty spread out and rural, do you have kids who spend significant time on the bus?

We have kids who will get on the bus at 7 in the morning and school doesn't start until 8. So yes, 40 to 50 minutes a day one way. But that's also part of living in a small community and living in that rural atmosphere. So that just means that much more time those kids are sitting and they're not getting exercise.

A lot of the reason people are thinking about and working on these things are the growing obesity issues among children. Do you feel Delta is part of that trend?

I think we're seeing more and more kids are obese, and a lot of that comes from parents being busy and grabbing fast food for dinner. We know more and more

families who eat out more and so they're not thinking about healthy choices. In our district they implemented the food guidelines. What we found is that it's not catching the kids who really need it. Those kids are still bringing their own lunch and not making healthy choices. They're not really eating the healthy meals anyway. And on the reverse side, we have athletic kids who are using a lot of calories and they eat the lunch but they are having to supplement with other things later in the day because they get hungry. We're probably going to have to educate parents as well because kids learn a lot of this by age 5 and have learned those eating habits at home. By implementing more PE – not just exercise but also education and nutrition, what to eat and what not to eat and why – we can solve some of those issues at an earlier age and not end up with so many obesity problems.

So what has Delta tried to change about PE or with physical activity as well, not just defined PE time?

We actually got a PE grant about three years ago, and we are writing our own curricula. And within that curricula, it's incorporating a lot of the aspects we are talking about like nutrition, how long you should be active and what part being active plays – making it more of a health and wellness and activity program rather than just going into the gym and playing kickball for an hour.

Do you have a districtwide mandate about how much PE time or activity time kids get?

We have that as part of our graduation requirement that you have to have so much PE or activity. Within our district, the kids who are very athletic, they can get those credits playing sports. If you don't play sports, we have PE classes where you can pick up those credits.

Has there been much pushback from anyone, either about the requirements for graduation or teachers who already feel like there’s not enough time in the day because of the academic testing requirements or other needs?

There’s been concern over the last several years because in Delta County, our budget has been very tight and so we’ve cut some stuff, and in doing that we’re not offering as many classes in PE, especially in our younger grades. They’re still getting [PE], but it may not be every day. Staff would like to see those kinds of programs back in on a regular basis. I do know our staff feels the crunch of all the mandates coming down; it’s so much more work for them to do the programs than it used to be. And I think that sometimes takes its toll on the kids. If it were up to me, it would be PE every day for every kid.

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>
> Tammy Smith, school board member, Delta County Schools

But as a board member, translating that to actual policy, maybe the resources aren't there? What’s holding that back?

It’s been financial. We’re going to keep pushing and hopefully build to the point where PE is every day, every kid. It’s a lot of educating to get there, including parents; it’s educating people that it’s important for a lifetime of health.

We’re not just making kids go out and run a mile because we feel like it. Sometimes kids will go home and say, “Oh, they made us run a mile today,” without any understanding of why that might be important.

Is it different in a small town than in a big city?

One difference is that everybody knows everybody, and you know the parents and the kids and you know the backgrounds of everybody involved. So sometimes that makes it easier to deal with things because you know where people are coming from and you can use those relationships collaboratively. If you feel like a kid may be hitting a point where they are dangerously obese, you can sit down with the family and have a conversation and say, we think it would be helpful if they started participating in this or that activity.

What would you like to see happening differently in PE in the next few years?

I’d like to see the continuation of PE incorporated into overall wellness. With the lack of resources and finances, sometimes electives are the first thing to go. So the PE grant has given us the chance to push things forward and make sure our kids and our schools become healthy and happy, productive places. And to get kids thinking about going out and taking a hike or doing something outside or go to the gym – for their lifetime after they get out of school. A lot of kids play sports in school but then when they get out, they are no longer physically active. So it’s giving them the tools to be healthy adults once they leave our district.

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