

Celebrating Connection and Community through Active Schools

Dr. Brian Dauenhauer is an Associate Professor in the [School of Sport and Exercise Science](#) and Director of the [Active Schools Institute](#) at UNC. Dr. Dauenhauer and the Institute were recognized by the Office of Community and Civic Engagement with the Collective Community Impact Award at the 2018 Community Engaged Scholars Symposium.

We wanted to better understand the work of Dr. Dauenhauer and the influence of the UNC Active Schools Institute. To do so, we interviewed the Director to learn more about the passion behind the work of getting kids active and developing teachers who can implement physical activity in their own schools.



Who is He?

Growing up, Dr. Dauenhauer “played everything under the sun.” As a kid he loved soccer, tennis, and rollerblading, and throughout high school he played baseball, volleyball, and basketball for his school’s varsity teams; he also enjoyed playing golf on the weekends. His interest in physical education was initially fostered while still in high school during his time as a youth basketball coach. However, he began his college career at the University of Illinois as an Aeronautical & Astronautical Engineering student. He quickly realized that doing math all day was not something he could get excited about so he switched majors and followed his true passion. Dr. Dauenhauer says “Physical education combines two of my greatest passions: being active and teaching kids.”

After completing his PhD at The University of Texas, Dr. Dauenhauer considered UNC among his top choices for his family due to Colorado’s reputation for active living and UNC’s reputation for preparing high quality teachers.

UNC Active Schools Institute

The UNC Active Schools Institute was created by a passionate group of educators and researchers who wanted to make a difference in schools through physical activity promotion. Dr. Russell Carson, the Founding Director of the Institute, always envisioned expanding the impact of their work and with the help of multiple grants including two from the Colorado Health Foundation, the Institute’s interdisciplinary team has grown substantially.

Beyond just being a research center, the Institute strives to serve the community and operate as a learning laboratory for students. “We believe in community engaged research that not only

informs the field, but provides valuable services to the schools we serve,” states Dr. Dauenhauer.

The Institute team also hosts different community events, such as the Physical Activity Leadership (PAL) Academy in the summer and TAP Talks at local breweries (informal gatherings of school practitioners to share ideas surrounding school health initiatives) throughout the year. By reaching out into the community, the Institute hopes to engage community members in dialogue about active schools. The events and activities hosted by the Institute also give undergraduate and graduate students many opportunities to get field experience and develop valuable skills, such as collecting and presenting data.

Importance

Teachers are often prepared to provide quality physical education; however, the positive impact of physical education classes may be limited due to time constraints in many schools. According to the nationally recommended standard, children should achieve 60 minutes of physical activity every day. This guideline means that opportunities for physical activity outside of PE are needed for children to develop their skills and learn healthy habits. UNC’s MAT-PEPAL [Master of Arts in Teaching Physical Education and Physical Activity Leadership] program intends to tackle this issue by training teachers to include physical activity throughout the entire school day. “Teachers need to step outside of the gym walls and promote physical activity more broadly throughout the school community,” Dr. Dauenhauer says.

For kids, the benefits of physical activity are substantial. In Dr. Dauenhauer’s words, “if you could take all of the benefits of physical activity and put them into a pill... it would be a miracle drug, and everyone would want to take it.” Increased physical activity has been shown to benefit children’s physical, mental, social, and emotional health, including improving attention and academic performance.

“Research shows,” Dr. Dauenhauer shares, “that if you take time away from academic subject areas and give it to physical education, academic performance does not go down... it remains neutral or increases.” Instead of detracting from a school’s primary academic purpose, physical education enhances it. But the most important benefit for kids, in Dr. Dauenhauer’s mind, is “the pure joy that comes from moving and playing.”

Impact

Both kids and teachers are greatly benefiting from the work being done by the Active Schools Institute and the training being provided by the MAT-PEPAL program. For example, kids who have participated in the Bear PAW summer camp, led by teachers enrolled in the MAT-PEPAL program, enjoy learning new skills while playing with friends.

Every year, the top graduates of the MAT-PEPAL program present capstone projects at the SHAPE Colorado Conference and make their mark as they teach other educators about

promoting physical activity in schools. “Graduates of the MAT-PEPAL program have become leaders in the field,” comments Dr. Dauenhauer. A number have created new, unique positions in schools with the help of administrators who value the work of getting the school active. Dr. Dauenhauer reports that, “Through our first three cohorts in the MAT-PEPAL program, we have a 97% graduation rate.” Graduates of the program seem satisfied and are willing to persist to better the lives of the kids in their schools.

Go and check out their [website](#) to learn more about the Institute and the MAT-PEPAL program.