The Case for Martial Arts Clubs in Schools: Improving Students’ Physical and Emotional Development

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**Introduction**

Nearly one in four high school students have been in a physical fight. While this may be an unbelievable statistic for some, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, 22% of American high school students fall under this category. Additionally, 8% of the same demographic have been involved in fights that occurred on school premises. This recurrence of physical altercations is just one of many problems, along with increasing depression rates and a general lack of character, plaguing today’s youth. Contrary to what many believe, education is just as much about character building, socialization, and emotional development as academics, and school can offer an effective environment where much of a student’s development in these areas can occur. However, these previously mentioned issues can severely hinder this development. The introduction of martial arts clubs into schools thus offers a practical, evidence-based solution to address these issues. Implementing martial arts programs will instill resilience, self-discipline, and emotional regulation into the lives of students, while teaching physical fitness and self-defense. The following white paper defines the problems with which students grapple today, shows how martial arts clubs can solve those problems, and makes a case that such a solution is a productive addition to school programs.

**Background**

Mental health is one of the major concerns these days among adolescents. According to recent statistics (see below), the trends of sadness or hopelessness among high school students have grown alarmingly from 28% in 2011 to 44% in 2021 (Vankar).

A graph with numbers and a bar

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Figure 1 (Percentage of Depressed High School Students)

These issues can be caused by a variety of factors. According to a 2020 study from the National Library of Medicine, two of the most common factors that influence depressive behaviors among high school students are a lack of social support and self-esteem (Bhattarai et al.). When students do not have peers or superiors that they can feel comfortable around or when they feel incapable of achieving their goals, they tend to sink into feelings of hopelessness and despair. These emotional struggles unfortunately yield poor academic performance, strained social relationships, and long-term psychological problems. Such challenges require intervention that helps improve emotional resilience and self-esteem.

Additionally, physical fights in schools are pervasive and often stem from an insecure learning environment. As previously mentioned, one in four high school students reported being involved in fights at least once in the last year while almost one in ten students have been in fights on school property ("Physical Fights on School Property and Anywhere"). This kind of behavior affects not only the victims but also the whole learning environment. Without ways of effectively managing conflict and reducing aggression, schools are having to struggle with keeping students safe. Additionally, many of these students are unable or unwilling to defend themselves. While initiating a fight at school is almost never justified, students who find themselves in these difficult situations need a way to defend themselves for their own safety and the safety of those around them.

Related to the occurrence of physical fights in schools is the prevalence of bullying. While many physical conflicts may arise because of mutual disagreement or anger between students, oftentimes students bully others because it allows them to feel more powerful than other students who they view as less threatening or are unwilling to stand up for themselves. According to the NCES, roughly one in five students ages 12-18 have been bullied at or during school (Fast Facts). A 2013 study found that students who were being bullied were more likely to report academic problems (Espinoza et al.). If left unchecked, bullying can lead to severe ramifications in a student’s well-being, particularly in an academic or emotional context. To properly curb this harmful behavior, students need to learn how to become more confident and stand up for themselves against their bullies.

**Solution**

The inclusion of traditional sports programs, such as soccer or football, in physical education has been instrumental in promoting physical fitness. And while these sports are beneficial when it comes to improving team building and socialization skills, they are not always effective at promoting emotional regulation or resolving interpersonal conflicts effectively. Activities that help in both the physical and psychological development of children are few and far between, though research indicates that martial arts training can fill this gap. Traditional martials, such as karate, judo, kung fu, and taekwondo are particularly effective at this (Moore et al.). This is why schools need to add martial arts programs in the same way other sports are.

To accomplish this integration of martial arts into schools, schools would be able to use a similar process to what is done for typical sports. Before anything else, however, schools need to make sure that students understand what martial arts are. Because traditional martial arts are not native to the West, many students may have misconceptions about what they are like and may not immediately see the benefits of joining a martial arts program.

One way to solve this problem would be for the schools to hold an informational meeting that students could voluntarily attend. At this meeting, various teachers with experience in martial arts could explain what the purpose of these arts is and why they would be beneficial or enjoyable to the students in attendance. They could also go into more detail about the strengths and weaknesses of each individual martial art, such as explaining how Muay Thai is combat-heavy, tai chi is healing-focused, and karate is more well-rounded. After this meeting is held, a survey could be offered to all the attendees. This survey would contain the various styles of martial arts discussed in the meeting to determine which martial art(s) the students would enjoy most. If the school determines there is significant interest in the addition of certain martial arts programs, they will then search for instructors for the classes. Most likely, a sensei at a local dojo would be a very beneficial option for a teacher for each martial arts program.

The school would then need to find a place for the students to train. There are two main options that could work. The first option would require the school to use either a large room in the school or a portion of their gym (assuming they have one). The school would then need to supply mats for the students to train on, given that hard floors are not a productive training environment. The other option would be to rent space from a dojo in the area that already has mats and equipment for the classes. This would probably be a much more efficient and cost-effective option for the school to pay for.

After this, the school would need to buy equipment for the students. Thankfully, most martial arts require very little equipment for the students to train. The primary cost would be for uniforms for the students and potentially sparring equipment, depending on whether the martial arts teacher deems it necessary or not. The last major step would be to have all the participants sign waivers, such as the one shown below which is an example of a general waiver for a sport from Sadler Sports & Recreation Insurance.

A form with red text

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Figure 2 (Example Safety Waiver)

This waiver would contain legal information that exempts the school from legal liability for any injuries that may result from the martial art. This is very similar to the kind of waiver that would be signed for another high-injury high school sport like football or wrestling. With all these steps completed, a school would be well-prepared to provide a new martial arts program for any interested students.

**Defense**

Martial arts clubs provide a structured program where students can learn self-defense, discipline, and teamwork in a safe and supportive environment. They are programs that combine physical training with character education to provide for the holistic development of the students. Martial arts focus on building courage, respect, and conflict resolution that easily integrate into existing anti-bullying programs. In fact, martial arts-based antibullying programs are associated with significant decreases in aggressive behavior by elementary school participants, though it is reasonable to expect similar effects among secondary school students (Twemlow et al.).

Equally impressive are the physical benefits associated with martial arts. Martial arts have been shown to improve cardiovascular fitness, coordination, and flexibility (Bu and Singh).

On top of this, many martial arts, such as Muay Thai and certain styles of karate have a style of conditioning that focuses on physical toughness and bone and muscle strengthening. According to a 2023 study on Muay Thai boxers, Muay Thai alone has a plethora of major physical benefits, such as increased muscular endurance, limb strength, and agility (Saengsawang). These benefits would not only help to achieve the physical education goals of schools but would also allow students to accomplish other physical tasks that may not be school-related, like being able to carry heavier objects or have better physical endurance.

Additionally, martial arts provide the major advantage of teaching students self-defense techniques. Historically, many martial arts developed out of a need for people to defend themselves against various threats. Jiu-jutsu, for example, was originally created by Japanese samurai around the turn of the 16th century to teach the warriors hand-to-hand combat and grappling skills for the battlefield (Craig). Traditional self-defense focused martial arts such as judo and jiu-jutsu are particularly effective at teaching practical skills that would be useful for students who find themselves in a fight, either at school or outside of it. This would not only be useful for preventing bullying among students by giving them a way to defend themselves, but it could also lead to improved confidence and self-esteem among these same students. In a study on the effects of self-defense on an individual’s self-esteem, researchers found that when subjects had a higher level of self-defense, they also have increased self-esteem (Huang). So, the practice of these martial arts would not only improve a student’s physical wellness, but they would also have a positive impact on the general feelings of self-inefficacy and the lack of confidence plaguing many students today.

Critics may mention the cost of implementing such programs in schools involving martial arts, but it can be significantly reduced when partnering with local schools of martial arts and community agencies. Many programs encourage the utilization of community resources to ensure access is provided without sacrificing quality instruction (Antunes et al.). Martial arts are also just a generally low-cost activity. While equipment such as heavy bags and training weights can be useful, the only strictly necessary purchases would be for the students’ uniforms and personal gear.

Another potential concern is that training in martial arts could make kids more aggressive, as some people claim. However, one of the main tenants of most traditional martial arts is that of peace. Styles such as Pangainoon Hino-Ryu karate teach that students “observe the way of peace and teamwork.” One of the most famous historical martial artists, Musashi Miyamoto, once said that “the ultimate aim of martial arts is not having to use them” (The Book of Five Rings). These arts do not promote reckless aggression and bullying, but instead encourage their students to have control over their impulses and seek peace before violence.

One last criticism that many might harbor about martial arts is that they are unsafe. While an understandable concern, it is not one to worry about. While it is true that hand-to-hand combat and sparring are an aspect of many traditional martial arts, they are not the primary method used to teach students. For example, many martial arts teachers will frequently have students practice line drills, where they throw techniques in the air to simply practice their power and accuracy. Additionally, schools have no qualms offering football as a sports program, even though it accounts for over 500,000 high school injuries annually (Mills). If a sport such as this is considered acceptable, then there should be no issue offering a martial arts program taught by a capable and observant teacher.

**Conclusion**

Contemporary students' problems require effective and new solutions. With the prevailing issues of depression, bullying, and often unsafe learning environments plaguing our students, adding martial arts to schools is a necessary addition to improve the lives of many students. Implementing martial arts programs will instill resilience, self-discipline, and emotional regulation into the lives of these students, while teaching physical fitness and self-defense. These major traits, along with many others, cultivated through martial arts programs can prepare students for academic success and personal growth and ensure their safety and well-being. The establishment of a martial arts club in schools can be viewed not only as a solution to problems of our generation, but as a step towards a healthier and brighter future.

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