

Effectiveness of sports schools in Latvia

Author: Dita Niedra & Packianathan Chelladurai

Institutions: Latvian Olympic Committee & Troy University

The Republic of Latvia is bordered by Estonia in the north, Lithuania in the south, Russian Federation in the east, and Belarus in the southeast. Latvia has been a member of the United Nations since September, 1991; NATO since March, 2004; and the European Union since May, 2004. The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia which is responsible for sports supports the system of sports schools in Latvia. The concept of a sport school originated in the former Soviet Union. As Latvia was part of the former Soviet Union, it followed the lead and established and supported the sports schools. Today there are about 27,000 youth in 65 sport schools offering 37 different kinds of sports. Although the sports schools have been in existence for more than 60 years, there has been no systematic effort to assess the effectiveness of the system of sports schools. The present study is the first attempt to fill this void.

As effectiveness is the extent to which an organization achieves its stated objectives, we identified two significant outcomes envisaged for the Latvian Sports Schools—(a) the promotion of an active and healthy lifestyles among the participants and (b) development of athletic talent (Cesu City sport school's Regulations No. 1, point 2). Accordingly, the research was designed to verify if the sports schools were effective in achieving these two objectives.

If the system was successful in cultivating a physically active lifestyle in its participants, it should be reflected in later life. More specifically, one can expect that former members of sports schools should be relatively more physically active than a comparable group of non-members of sports schools. To verify this proposition, we selected 79 former members of sports schools (males = 46; females = 33) who had left the schools at least 10 years earlier and a comparable group of 86 non-members of school (males = 30; females = 55). We administered the Godin-Shephard Leisure-Time Physical Activity Questionnaire (Godin, 2011) which measures the weekly frequencies of a person's engagement in *strenuous*, *moderate*, and *mild* physical activities. The measurement protocol specified that the composite score for physical activity be computed as follows:

Weekly leisure-time activity score = (9 x Strenuous) + (5 x Moderate) + (3 x Mild)

These weekly activity scores of former members of sports schools and non-members ($M = 13.99$ and 10.08 respectively) differed significantly from each other ($t(df = 164) = 2.98; p < .01$). Thus, one can conclude that the sports schools were effective in creating an active healthy lifestyle among its members.

As for the second question, success in the development of talent would be indicated by the number of sport school students who become members of the national teams at various age levels. Based on this premise it was hypothesized that the students of the sports schools would constitute a significantly larger percentage of national team athletes than those members who had not attended the sports schools. For the present purpose, we asked the members of the Latvian Olympic Contingent to the 2012 London Olympics ($n = 64$) if they were members of the sports schools. Chi square analysis of the distribution of those athletes who were members of sports schools ($n = 37$) and those who were not ($n = 22$; five non-answers) showed that a significantly larger proportion of the Olympians were former members of sports schools ($\chi^2 = 3.8; p < .05$). Thus, it is an indication of the effectiveness of the sports schools in developing talent.

While the above steps would evaluate the effectiveness of the sports schools with regard to the two outcomes of active lifestyle and talent development, they would not indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the structure and processes within the sport schools. Therefore, we organized focus groups consisting of the coaches of the sport schools and the parents of children of the sport schools and asked them to discuss (a) what was good about the sports schools, (b) what were the weaknesses they experienced with the sports schools, and (c) what were the opportunities for improving the sports school operations, (d) what were the barriers for enhancing the sports school system, and (e) their views of improving the operation of the sports schools. The results of this phase of the study will be presented in the form of (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats - SWOT) analysis. Finally, the results of all phases of the study and their theoretical and practical implications will be discussed.

References

- Godin, G. (2011). The Godin-Shephard Leisure-Time Physical Activity Questionnaire. *Health & Fitness Journal of Canada*, 4, (1), 1, 18-22.
- Cesu City sport school's Regulations No.1, point 2. Retrieved from <http://www.cesusportaskola.lv/PDF/nol.cpss.pdf>;