



Game On: Harnessing the Power of Sports and Physical Activity for Mental Wellness (w/ Jon Solomon) (*Transcript*)

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[PODCAST INTRO] 0:00 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Hello, everyone. I'm Kari Vogelgesang, your host of the Educator Wellness Podcast. Here to share and promote my life's work and passion, all things wellness. But not just any wellness. We're here to discuss wellness specifically as it pertains to educators. I am a former elementary school teacher and I am passionate about helping educators see wellness in a very different way. This podcast is dedicated to educators across the globe, creating a space for us to come together in an authentic and therapeutic way, sharing our stories, our hopes, our joys, our fears, our sorrows, and hopefully creating some space to share some laughter with one another as well in our journey to learn how to support one another, to prioritize wellness and enhance our overall well-being. Please join me as we talk with nationally

recognized experts to guide us on a transformative journey of self-discovery, helping us to embrace and weave all dimensions of wellness into the fabric of both our personal and professional lives.

Also, please note that the opinions and perspectives that are shared on this podcast do not necessarily represent those at the Scanlon Center for School Mental Health, or the University of Iowa.

Welcome to the Scanlon Center for School Mental Health, Educator Wellness Podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Kari Vogelgesang, and we are thrilled to bring you an exciting episode titled Game On: Harnessing The Power of Sports and Physical Activity for Mental Wellness. Joining our conversation today is expert guest, Jon Solomon. And Jon Solomon is the community and impact director of the Sports and Society Program with the Aspen Institute. Jon has spent his career trying to pursue the truth in sports.

Interesting. While exploring how our tremendously entertaining, passionate, and flawed games can play a role in creating a more equitable society. As community impact director of the Aspen Institute Sports and Society Program, he leads Project Play's community work portfolio, national and local youth sports research and media relations.

Jon has authored more than 20 youth sports reports, including the annual national State of Play, local State of Play reports in communities around the US and Reimagining School Sports reports. Prior to joining the Aspen Institute in 2017, Jon was an award-winning sports reporter covering college football, NCAA issues, and investigative stories. He worked at cbssports.com, the Birmingham News, The State, the Anderson Independent-Mail, and the Washington Post. Jon previously served as a youth soccer and basketball coach, and his claim to fame was going winless in his final soccer season. Jon lives in Urbana, Maryland with his wife Mandy and sons, Daniel and Josh.

In today's conversation, we're going to delve into the incredible impact that sports and physical activities can have on our mental wellness. We'll discuss practical strategies that coaches and educators can implement to create welcoming spaces that foster empathy and inclusion. And additionally, we're going to explore the numerous benefits that children and adolescents gain from participating in physical activities. So welcome everyone. I'm excited for you all to join today's conversation.

Hi Jon. Welcome to the Scanlon Center for School Mental Health Educator Wellness Podcast. I'm so happy for you to be on today. Thank you for joining us.

3:59 | Jon Solomon:

Absolutely. Thanks for having me.

4:01 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. So I am excited about today's talk because I think it's a little bit different than anything we've ever had on the show. And we're going to be talking about physical health, how that impacts our mental health, which isn't a new topic for us. But we're going to bring in some information today that's directed maybe a little bit more towards coaches in K through 12 schools and their own physical mental health and the impact that their health has on their student athletes and even how that's connected to educators and K through 12 by and large. So I think it's going to be a really interesting conversation. But I would really like it if we could just start by Jon, can you just tell us a little bit about the Aspen Institute and Project Play?

4:47 | Jon Solomon:

Yeah. Absolutely. So the Aspen Institute Sports Society Program, we're a nonprofit based in Washington D.C., And our main initiative is called Project Play. We develop, mobilize and share knowledge to help build healthy communities through sports. We really take a deep dive looking at what is the state of access to quality sports opportunities and other forms of physical activity for all children? Because we know all of the social, emotional, mental academic benefits that come from a positive sports experience or just physical activity in general. So we do a lot of work in terms of research, writing reports, trying to identify solutions and ideas to grow quality access both nationally and then we also work in certain communities across the country as well.

5:39 Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

So it's such important and interesting work. We talk a lot about how important physical health is just for our total full well-being. And it does feel like every year almost students aren't necessarily getting all of ... Not just students. I would say people in general, and maybe you can correct me on this statistic if you want. Aren't maybe moving their bodies nearly as much as we used to in the past. Is that an accurate statement?

6:13 | Jon Solomon:

It is. Nationally ... For youth, we particularly look at youth, but it's true as well for adults. But for children like ages six to 17, it's about 23, 24% of youth receive 60 minutes of physical activity each day, which is what the CDC recommends. It keeps going down. It's a challenge. And it's hard because people are busier and busier. Technology has changed how we communicate, how we live our lives. And so being physically active and playing sports, even though there's so much research showing the mental health benefits that come from it just can become pretty challenging for people to access it or even have interest to access it.

6:56 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. And I think that leads me to one of my first guiding questions that I shared with you that I really wanted to touch on, which is can you help us better understand the psychological benefits of sports and physical activities on our mental health?

7:11 | Jon Solomon:

Yeah. Absolutely. There's just so much research out there showing that kids who are physically active are more likely to have higher test scores. They're less likely to be obese, they are more likely to have high self-esteem. They're less likely to be depressed and feel hopeless. They're more likely to go to college. It's going to help with their long-term health benefits as well. And then, oh, by the way, there's a lot of correlation showing that active parents then also are associated with active kids. So it becomes this virtuous cycle. If you're playing sports, if you've been physically active from young ages all the way through adulthood, then more likely your kids are going to have seen you be active, you're a model for them, and you're going to be physically active as well.

Now, I do want to say that just because you're playing sports doesn't in and of itself mean you're going to have great mental health. Obviously there's so many factors that are part of this. And also, and one thing that we dive into some of our work at Project Play is that sports can have a negative impact on someone's mental health. It can have a positive impact, but can have negative. It's all in the delivery of it. It's all in what the experience is like for the child. Is their voice, is their interests, are their needs centered in the experience? That's our number one strategy at Project Play. Ask kids what they want. It's their experience, not ours. And it's really important of who the coach is. You could have a really bad coach and that can impact whether a child wants to play sports again, but also could exacerbate other mental health challenges the child already has. Perhaps the coach doesn't even know.

8:56 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. So this is the topic. I'm personally, and I know that other people ... I've had so many lengthy discussions about this coaching piece of a child's mental health. So my history, people who listen to this podcast know I grew up in a very competitive athletic family. My dad was my track and cross country coach. He was our athletic director. My friends were athletes, still are to some extent as adults athletes. I follow sports very closely and I have always been interested in this topic of coaching and how important a coach is in this whole process. So it's not just like you were just saying, it's not just the physical activity because that's great most of the time for the human body. But the role that the coach which is the educator in this plays in the physical ... Not just the physical, but the mental health of the student athlete. And that even involves their self-esteem, so on and so forth. So this is my question to you. Have you guys done much work or studies or do you follow studies that looks at the amount of training, particularly high school coaches or youth coaches have to have in order to be a coach?

10:22 | Jon Solomon:

We have. Yeah. I'll say this for youth coaches and by youth define it, meaning outside the school. So community-based teams or travel teams. The trainings are just all over the place. There's no real regulation unless you're part of a sport governing body or your particular association. But there's no real policies, no real standards across the board. There actually is a new law in Colorado that recently just came out that's requiring youth sports organizations who are not part of schools to train their coaches. And particularly in health and safety. Abuse prevention is a critical component of it. And they also have to have a reporting system where they can report violations to the State Attorney General who then would put it on a website. If it's been investigated and there's no complaints and objections to it, and it's a legitimate violation. In other words, Colorado is starting to put some teeth behind it. We'll see if there's enforcement mechanisms. That's always can be a challenge.

In schools, a lot of times state high school athletic associations do have requirements or school districts have requirements that you be trained in XYZ. Sometimes it can be related to like heat or use of AED or cardiac training. Sometimes it's related to sports skills. Sometimes it's related to how to engage with children. We did in partnership with Ohio State University a couple of years ago, a national survey of coaches over 10,000 coaches. And one of the big takeaways was that more and more coaches feel they aren't prepared to take on the mental health challenges of youth that they coach, but they are interested. They want to learn more. And they often don't know where to turn. Often these are volunteers. These are people who are experts in sports or passionate about sports. They're not experts in mental health or child behavior. So we have to coach them up on it. We have to remember that a lot of them are volunteers. They can't be expected to become trained therapists or psychologists. But the

reality is children are telling us they need help and they're struggling to receive timely mental health access to trained providers. You probably know this, it's incredibly difficult to get appointments these days. So coaches could become a first line of defense just equipped with some basic skills to manage situations until a professional can be made available.

So in some of our work, we've had some recommendations of, okay, what are some minimal skills that coaches should have? And we've gotten this from some medical experts who suggest, start here. One, just be able to identify the signs and symptoms of a mental health crisis. Coaches should recognize when a situation may be more than just a typical behavioral issue. Second, understand how to have an honest and compassionate conversation in a nonjudgmental way with young people. And that means practicing reflective listening. It means holding space for players to talk and process the information to then determine next steps. And that also requires just teaching coaches how to validate the athlete's emotions, how to react, including body language if there are mental health concerns that are expressed. And then third tip that we have is learn how to eliminate or decrease coaches' own stigmas around mental health. We as adults are suffering with mental health challenges too, and coaches can only help their athletes if they're comfortable talking about the subject and they're willing to be vulnerable and open some themselves.

14:01 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. I love that. I love that you gave some action items because that was definitely going to be one of my next follow up questions with you. And I think that those are all really ... Everything that you just shared with us are things that are very doable and manageable if people just invest in time and some systems and structure around how to give this information to coaches. Because I agree with you. I think that they all want it, and a lot of them are volunteers or darn near volunteers, even when you think of the stipend they get when they're a K through 12 educator, it's basically volunteer work. They're not getting paid very much in most districts. So yeah. Just doing the investment in the system structure piece of it to get them what they need is really where we start. And it has to come from administrators or from governing bodies to make sure that that happens.

14:56 | Jon Solomon:

It does. I was going to say or even parents. Parents are ultimately the consumers, and if this is an important need for them, if sports to them are more than just winning games and chasing the college athletic scholarship or college admissions ... Not there's anything wrong with that. There's nothing wrong with healthy competition. But if there's a belief that playing sports are more than that for their child, then they can demand and expect that as well from their coaches, and that just creates maybe some standards around it.

15:27 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. Let's just maybe try to take this even a step further about supportive environments because that includes parents for certain as well. And when you're having conversations around what are our goals for the types of environments that we're trying to create for our student athletes, then what would be some effective strategies coaches and actually parents working together can use to create safe and supportive sports environments?

15:55 Jon Solomon:

Yeah. We actually have a resource at Project Play called Calls for Coaches, and this was a resource developed in partnership with Harvard University. And it's just tips and strategies about how coaches can do more than just the X's and O's and the wins and losses. And one of the biggest things is just get to know your athlete and who they are. Even simple things of what names they like being used and be called. Or if they have particular nicknames or just building some rapport and some relationships where it's more organic and not putting them on trial and forcing them to answer. But you have to build that trust. Kids aren't stupid. I have kids, and they know if you're trying to be someone or that you're not or give them something that's just not very useful for them. So I think sometimes it's building that rapport and letting kids lead a little bit of where they want to go and knowing them well enough where you can see red flags and be able to ask, Hey, everything okay today or what's going on? You're a little bit of a different mood than usual. That's one of the biggest starting points.

17:13 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. I love this. Just a simple thing about making sure that you're calling them by the right name or you're pronouncing their name accurately is definitely a good place to start. And we oftentimes teach educators that building that relationship is the number one most important thing that you can do when you're working with a child. When you're working with anyone building a positive relationship. But taking that even a step further, how would you recommend coaches fostering a culture of empathy and inclusion? I grew up in the era of there wasn't a lot of empathy in sports when I was ... My dad was quite old school, and I think most coaches at that time were. I think were learning more about creating spaces that are more inclusive for all different types of people. And what would you say how to do that and why is that important?

18:18 | Jon Solomon:

Yeah. For one, the times have clearly changed. You have to relate and talk to children in different ways. But I want to be clear. That doesn't mean that you're still not demanding. Or it doesn't mean that you still don't have expectations. It's more of how you go about setting expectations. Because I think expectations ... And it still can be incredibly important. If you're not doing what you need to do for your team, if you're not showing up to practices or you're coming late or you're misbehaving, there still need to be consequences. But it's about doing it in a way that's not bullying, that's not insulting, that's not demeaning. You can challenge athletes without being demeaning, without putting them down, without feeling like they're unwelcome and that it creates a culture where it feels unwelcome.

When we survey children across the country and we ask them lots of questions, and one of the questions that we ask them is their biggest reasons why they play sports.

And the top reasons always in every particular community are to have fun and to be with friends. And winning games I promise you ranks much lower. Chasing scholarships ranks even lower than that. Then when we ask some of the youth who don't play sports or don't play very often or haven't played in a while, why they don't play sports, and there are various reasons. Some is got too much homework to do. I have family responsibilities. I have job responsibilities. Those are very real issues. And then a decent

amount though also is I don't feel welcome. I don't see myself as an athlete basically on this team. Basically what they're saying is that the teammates aren't kind to me or the coaches aren't kind to me. And it's why would you want to go to a place where you don't feel welcome, where you don't feel like you can be yourself? Again, you can still set expectations, but doing it in a way that's still welcoming. Because the reality is youth sports participation has been declining. It's been declining significantly. And if we don't adjust and put children's interests and needs first and foremost, then it's just not going to change.

20:35 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

So Jon, that is fascinating actually. It's such a paradox almost. We have this group who are saying, I'm doing it for this reason, like friendship, belonging, being a teammate, and then another group is identifying those same reasons for not participating. And I just think that it just goes to show obviously it's sports ... And I think we've both been around sports long enough that we've seen this before. That they can sometimes create spaces that signal to certain groups of people and parents and families, you belong, you don't belong. And it's even through signaling and things like all of these dads that are coaching on this baseball team also played at this high school, and so these are the families and these are the players that we're going to allow on the team or to allowed to have a voice on the team or to be accepted in certain ways on the team. And it can just be so harmful. Not only to individual students, but to a community at large.

21:56 | Jon Solomon:

It can. And sometimes also it can be unintentional. And you don't even know that you're not being inclusive and leaving people out. And we've done focus groups sometimes with youth. I remember one with teenagers and there were several Hispanic kids. And some of them have tried playing golf on their high school golf team. And they felt unwelcome. Not intentionally, but a lot of the children ... And these were white children and they were more privileged from higher income households, their teammates, they've been playing golf for a long time. They came to practices with the best equipment, the best clothes. And these other children didn't have that and just felt like not really being part of their conversations, being part of that culture, and they quit playing golf. It wasn't a sport for them. You hear that in several sports, that it's just not enough diversity and thought of how to be more welcoming.

22:57 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Mm-hmm. And as we're trying to increase people's activity, that's just really important. If we're really trying to get people to participate and to keep sports alive and well and healthy for everyone, then obviously creating spaces where everybody feels like they can participate and belong is part of your job and it's essential. So there's this other thing that I wanted to ask you about too, which is more along the lines of ... Well, I guess it has to do with also creating spaces that make people feel like they want to participate and they want to be part of the team and belong. But I've noticed how competitive youth sports and high school ... Youth, I'm talking about five-year-olds at this point in time all the way through high school and some of the competitive nature of just not only traveling teams, but also even just teams that are part of our public school systems.

And we had an experience here where we had a change in coaches. I won't even say which team. When one of my sons was playing a particular sport. And the conditioning used to be one way where they did a

lot of the conditioning through games. They did a lot of the conditioning for this particular sport through Frisbee golf. And I don't know. There's lots of different challenges and games with the conditioning, for example. And then it switched to just more traditional forms of conditioning, I guess you could say. It was not game-based. And we saw a number of students who left the sport, which I thought was really ... And I don't think it was just conditioning, but I'm giving an example. How important do you feel like through the youth sports experience, is it to keep it game-based and fun? Obviously still holding people accountable and teaching rules and so on and so forth. But do you feel like that is a very important element, or do you feel like it's okay to be really more serious about the sport even when they're young?

25:09 | Jon Solomon:

So I think you want to keep it fun the whole time as much as possible. And the biggest thing is letting the child lead. What happens too often I think, is that parents put their own interests, their own desires ahead of where their child is even at, where they're at developmentally as an athlete physically, but also emotionally and mentally where they are developmentally with what time of commitment they want to put into this. So if a child is incredibly passionate and a child is taking the lead then I think you follow the child's lead of trying to play more competitive sports. But a big thing at Project Play that we promote is, we encourage that every child plays equally in sports up to about age 12. And I think there probably will be people who say what? Because there are U eight national championships and regional championships that go on in various sports. But you don't want to leave children out before their bodies, minds and interests have fully developed.

And even if a child incredibly loves a sport at a particularly young age, if you're playing that sport year round, a lot of research shows that is a recipe for increased risk of one burnout and two overuse injuries. If you love baseball, but you're playing baseball 10 to 12 months out of the year, you're probably going to end up with some arm injuries and there's a chance you're also going to burnt out. And if you haven't been exposed to other sports, if you haven't tried other sports, what do you have to fall back on? If at that point you're injured and can't play baseball anymore, or you're tired of baseball and want to quit, you may not have been exposed to anything else. So we just we're very big at Project Play about letting the child lead and make sure that it's youth-centered experiences. It doesn't mean leading practices or leading the team. It's just including their needs and their interests, even if it's through surveys or just talking with them.

One way to think of it is that it's basically the number one rule in business to know your customer. And the kids ultimately are the customer. The parents are paying for it and driving them there, but the kids are the ones who are going to decide often whether they come back or not. And we often bemoan technology and social media and video games. And sometimes with good reason. Probably with a lot of good reason. I see my own kids on their video games too often, and it's sedentary behavior, and you want them being active and moving their bodies. But think about what video games and e-sports and technology, why that's become so popular is that it's what young people look for in experience. There's action, there's freedom, there's competition, there's inclusion, there's connection, there's personalization. And you don't have adults looking over your shoulder at every move saying, do this, do that. Why did you do that wrong? So I think youth sports could actually learn a lot from the video game industry, from technology by providing a product that is based on what children actually want and need.

28:20 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. That's really an interesting way of looking at it. Because you're right. You're not going to keep doing something that isn't fun. Adults don't either. If you don't get some enjoyment out of even the job that you have, you're going to eventually look for a different job and leave that job. Yeah, so I agree with you. I also understand that sometimes it's riding that line of we also want to be competitive, and we also want to win because winning's fun too. I get that. I do.

28:53 | Jon Solomon:

Yeah. There's a balance. No one likes losing every single game, and that can drive kids away as well if you're getting clobbered every single game. It's just finding that right balance based on the kid, based on the age, based on the experience that you want.

29:09 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. So there's another point that I want to just touch on you while I have you here today, which is resilience. Lately we've been talking a lot about building resilience in our students and even our educators. We've just seen so many changes even before COVID, but particularly since COVID and how we can help students and even educators build emotional resilience. And I'm wondering, in what ways do you feel like sports can help build emotional resilience in our students and how can this resilience benefit them in other parts of their lives?

29:54 | Jon Solomon:

Yeah. Sports are, again, when delivered properly are an incredible instrument of perseverance, of teaching resilience, of teaching teamwork and camaraderie, of having you be part of something bigger than yourself. A sense of belonging and accomplishing something. I just think back some to just myself growing up. Aging myself. I'm 47, so this is in the 1990s, growing up in '80s and '90s and loved playing soccer. I still am introverted, and I was really shy back then growing up. But playing on first a club soccer team, and then later my high school soccer team just built up some incredible confidence and belief. Just even making one good play on the field on defense ... I stopped them from that breakaway or was able to kick the ball away. I could feel how that confidence just starts to grow a little bit. And that just can grow in other areas of life as well. Not just sports. Sports just can be a mechanism to teach you resilience and perseverance in other aspects of your life. That's not to say that there aren't other things in life that can't teach that as well. Theater or music or the arts, all of it can. Sports can be pretty unique because of how popular they are in our society, in our country, and how much fun they can be.

31:24 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. I also noticed this other thing that about teamwork. I'm 46 so we're about the same age, and as I've worked with high schoolers, undergraduates, graduate students, even staff, I've always been able to really tell my team who has been a part of being a true team player and learn those team player type skills over a long period of time. You can always notice this. The people who don't necessarily always need to be in the spotlight or have all the credit, they know their role and their comfortable and

confident knowing that role, and then also knowing when to play defense or when they have to help out in certain areas and cover for somebody and then come back to their role. I feel like that's another thing that you learn by ... Again, like you said, it can be show choir can be any kind of a team. It just feels like it's a skill, it's a muscle that you have to practice that a lot in order to be able to do it and do it well.

32:38 | Jon Solomon:

Absolutely. Particularly as Title IX, since it's founded in 1972, and its impact on our society has made sports more accessible to girls. There's research showing that ... I don't know the exact statistic, but it's a large percentage of women who are in C-suites jobs today were high school athletes. So they understand that idea of teamwork that you're talking about, that ability of playing their role and getting things done, and it's just incredibly valuable.

33:11 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

It is. It's also sad because I've seen some statistics ... And you're going to know these a lot better than I do. Some of the things that I follow online that there's also this big dip in participation of girls who participate in athletics once they get to about junior high. Is that right?

33:34 | Jon Solomon:

Generally that could start being when it happens. Yep.

33:38 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. I'm wondering if there are things that you've been a part of that you've learned of to try to implement to help save that off or intervene?

33:50 | Jon Solomon:

Yeah. Middle school becomes a really critical year for all youth because it's that period where some kids are becoming a lot more talented athletically. Some kids have just been exposed to more sports and more trainings and more skill development than others. And so you start seeing these gaps and you see these gaps, and then kids feel like that they don't have a place for them to play. They don't feel like that they could even make a team. I played club soccer growing up for a number of years. I went to soccer camps. I don't know that I could make a high school soccer team anymore, at least the high school that I played at. At certain schools it could be incredibly competitive. One thing that we put out a couple of years ago was a report called Reimagining School Sports. Basically the idea is that the traditional high school sports model right now, it's outdated.

It really hasn't been updated since Title IX or 50 years ago. And in many ways it did work back in 1972, just like one in 27 girls played high school sports. Today it's more than one in three. So that's positive. Girls still lag boys in participation, but the gap is closing. But what's happened is that it's still left too many kids behind. There's two different models. We call the one that's currently exists in high school sports, a traditional model, and it's mostly about competing for your scholastic team. Playing sports in

high schools is largely dependent on did you make your varsity or JV team? And yet to make those teams, you maybe have to invest years of time and money on travel teams just to gain the skills and the exposure and development to make it. Lower resourced schools often field even fewer teams. And especially in urban communities.

And what we've said is that the next model for school sports really needs to be student centered and build it off the needs of interest in students. Of course, keep interscholastic teams. That's an important part of communities. And nothing wrong with competitive sports. But don't make it the only option. Students need more options for physical activity, whether it's through community partnerships with their schools. PE is getting cut so much across the country these days. Student led clubs and also intramurals. I don't know about you, but in my high school growing up, we had intramurals. A lot. You could play three on three basketball tournaments or street hockey tournaments, and you're just competing against your peers within the school, maybe for a month or six weeks or eight weeks, a tournament and a schedule. Not a huge cost. You just do have to find some staff who would run it, maybe a PE teacher or someone. But it allows some connectivity and physical activity to those students who just can't normally access sports anymore because they just feel they're not good enough. And in some cases they may be right they're not good enough to make teams because we often cut kids from sports.

36:53 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. So I think you're leading me to basically our final question with you. And so maybe you just want to build on this a little bit more because what I really wanted to know in ending the show today is what changes or improvements would you like to see in the way sports programs address, maybe not just mental health, but just the well-being of students overall and how these changes can be implemented effectively?

37:20 | Jon Solomon:

Yeah. It's a good thought. One, just to be clear, we know that schools have a lot on their plate. And incredible amount, particularly coming out of the pandemic. There's so many tests that have to be done for students. We know so many teachers and staff have been burned out. I know this, my wife is a teacher, and so I can see it and we know it. So we have to provide them some support. And some of that is just thinking outside the box. Even thinking, okay, who are other people in my community who we could partner with to provide this type of activity, whether it's in PE classes or intramurals or creating a club sports team?

As part of this Reimagining School Sports playbook that I was telling you about that we did a couple of years ago, we surveyed more than 6,000 high school students across the country to understand their experiences in sports and physical activity. And the big takeaway was that the supply of sport options being provided by high schools just isn't meeting the demand. And the menu needs to be updated. And one of the big takeaways we heard was more casual and fitness focused activities. More individualized activities. Of course, you're still always going to have the football and baseball, basketball, soccer, and some traditional sports. But there's a lot of students who are interested in strength training or biking or skateboarding or yoga or climbing or dance or parkour. We need to broaden our mind about what sports is because there's over 120 plus different types of sports that are out there. And just identifying the interests, which means surveying students and understand where their interest is, and then looking

for, okay, where are the capacities? Who within our community could help support this that we could bring in to help lead this if our capacities are short? So that's one thing.

And then the second thing I would say is just going back to what we started with, is that coaches being a valuable resource for children's mental health. I think that's going to be incredibly important. We've seen mental health talked about in sports a lot at higher levels at professional sports. If you think about some of the best coaches these days in pro sports are people who understand they need to deal with athletes in a different way now. Like Steve Kerr, let's say, the Golden State Warriors, how much success he's had. He is not traditionally that hollerer and screamer like you might think of like a Bobby Knight from the 1980s or 1990s.

39:55 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Oh yeah. I grew up watching Bobby.

39:59 | Jon Solomon:

That's not the coach we want. We don't want those people, those coaches like that. So just understanding that there can be a different type of coach and different type of experience. Olympians have talked about it so much about mental health. Michael Phelps, Simone Biles. We haven't created the spaces and created the education at the high school and youth level as much. I think there's a lot more interest and a lot more understanding that we have to. I think the next step is just going to be execution.

40:30 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. I love leaving on that thought. I really do, Jon, because I do think empowering coaches/educators because they are educators with the knowledge, the tools, the skills to be able to show up in ways that they want to show up for their student athletes. And helping them do that is really a direction that more people are going and that we need to keep going and pushing. I really appreciate you joining us today, Jon. It was really a lot of fun talking to you. I love sports, so anything that has to do with sports is fun for me. This has been a new topic, and it's definitely something new that we're bringing to the podcast, so thank you for that.

41:15 | Jon Solomon:

Absolutely. And if you don't mind, can I plug our website just if anyone-

41:18 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Of course. Absolutely.

41:19 | Jon Solomon:

We've got so many resources at projectplay.org. Resources for coaches, a lot of our playbooks and strategies, all kinds of interesting material. Research around participation in sports trends and those types of things.

41:35 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

I really encourage ... Especially if you're a coach or an educator in general, then I encourage you to check it out.

41:42 Jon Solomon:

Thank you so much.

41:43 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Thank you, Jon. Have a good day.

41:45 | Jon Solomon:

All right, thanks. You too.

41:48 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Thank you everyone for joining the conversation today. As we wrap up, I'm just reflecting on the critical need to support our coaches and their quest to learn more about mental wellness and how to recognize the signs of mental health challenges and their student athletes and what they may be experiencing in their lives and how that's impacting their participation in extracurricular activities. This conversation has also highlighted how essential it is to provide coaches, mentors, and educators with the tools and knowledge that they need to be able to create inclusive environments where every student feels welcome and valued. But I think for me, the most important thing that I'm taking away from this conversation is really how critical it is for adults across our communities to create multiple opportunities for all children and all adolescents to move their bodies joyfully in multiple ways. Promoting both their physical and mental wellbeing. Let's continue to collaborate and innovate, ensuring that every young person can experience the profound benefits of physical activity in a supportive and inclusive environment. Thank you for tuning in, and we look forward to having you with us on our next episode. I'm your host, Kari Vogelgesang forever cheering you on.