

DEVELOPING MONGOLIA'S RESILIENCY THROUGH **SPORTS, GAMES, AND PLAY**

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As the 2023 school year begins in Mongolia, thousands of children in early childhood education (ECE) programs and primary and secondary schools have only limited access to physical education classes. Across the country, there is a need for more and better physical education programs, including for children with disabilities. Currently, Mongolian children spend inadequate time participating in physical education classes, and thereby miss vital education and development activities through play and the peer socialization that ensues. This limited emphasis on physical education can also have a negative effect on children's academic performance.¹ Further, overlooking the physical activity needs of Mongolia's youth may diminish focus and mood in the classroom while also negatively impacting children's sense of well-being.² The long-term consequences can lead to fewer opportunities and poorer mental health, which together act to weaken the societal resiliency needed for Mongolia's democracy to thrive in the twenty-first century.

In this context, societal resiliency refers broadly to the ability of a society to cope with internal and external stresses and pressure. Sports, play, and daily physical activity are critical elements in early childhood development, and these elements play a direct role in the advancement of physically and psychologically resilient individuals. A healthy, educated, and resilient population is vital to the long-term maintenance of Mongolia's national sovereignty and continued democratic development. Despite pressure from authoritarian neighbors, Mongolia is still committed

to democratization.³ The leaders of this young democracy are actively pursuing innovative approaches to fostering resiliency within their society. In May 2020, the Parliament of Mongolia took a crucial step toward this end when it approved a long-term development policy for Mongolia titled "Vision-2050." Tellingly, the first priority of this policy focuses on strengthening shared values among the Mongolian people.⁴ It proposes to do so by educating the populace through language, history, and tradition, which it describes as the foundations for building a resilient nation.⁵

The achievement of this objective starts at the individual level and in the formative years. To assist Mongolia in addressing this issue, the US Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) in Monterey, California, has developed the Mongolian Sports and Education Program, which is designed to be a supplemental physical education resource for the Mongolian Ministry of Education and other education-based organizations, in support of Mongolia's long-term policy objectives.

This article first describes the current situation for children and education in Mongolia. It then discusses the steps that the government could take to improve the quality of and access to physical education as a means to improve mental and physical health, as well as social cohesion among Mongolia's youth. Finally, it will provide an overview of NPS's cooperative endeavor with the US Embassy in Ulaanbaatar and Mongolia's government, schools, and non-governmental organizations to improve mental and

Mongolia



physical health outcomes among youth through sports, games, and play.

The Mongolian Education Experience: Shortcomings and Effects

In an attempt to provide their children with all of the opportunities education can provide, many rural Mongolian families must leave their children in the local township, where they will live for extended periods of time in dormitories that are often outdated and poorly maintained. There are over 500 such dormitories across the country, which house roughly 35,000 young Mongolians; 15 percent of these buildings do not meet state housing standards.⁶ Too often, these children are learning and living in buildings that lack heat, indoor plumbing, or access to clean water.⁷ Of the nearly 800 schools spread throughout the country, almost 70 percent are located in rural townships.⁸ The remaining 30 percent of schools are concentrated in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, where nearly half of Mongolia's approximately 3.3 million citizens live. Rapid urbanization and too few schools mean that the city's classrooms are overcrowded and kids must vie for the attention of their overextended teachers.

Collectively, these challenges are exacerbating mental health problems among Mongolia's youth. Mongolia has a higher suicide rate than other regions of Asia.⁹ Between 2012 and 2016, 2,055 Mongolians committed suicide, with 30 percent of them between the ages of 10 and 29.¹⁰ The impact is devastating to families and communities, and the strain simultaneously erodes the legitimacy of Mongolian institutions that are perceived as failing to adequately address mental health issues.

Delivering consistent educational opportunities and equal access to resources for its citizens remains a serious challenge for the Mongolian government. Outdated infrastructure and low population density contribute to difficulties in the country's rural areas, while generally inadequate facilities and investment deny all children full access to the opportunities its democracy promises.¹¹ Rural nomadic families and children with disabilities suffer most. According to UNICEF, "one in every 4-5 children do not access early childhood education services. Seven out of 10 children from the poorest families do not go to kindergarten."¹² The strain on children, their families, and the teachers attempting to provide for them is negatively impacting the mental health and resiliency of young Mongolians, and has become one of the most pressing challenges for Mongolia's youth to overcome.¹³

A Practical Approach to Mongolian Resiliency

A key but undervalued component of Mongolia's stated policy goals is in the area of physical education. The love of athletics and competition, both traditional and modern, is evident across Mongolia, where the Olympic rings are prominently displayed in gymnasiums throughout the country. These cultural bonds are especially emphasized during the annual national Naadam Festival, which celebrates traditional athletic competition, music, and arts. Mongolian wrestling is the sporting centerpiece of the Naadam competitions, and its practice thrives throughout the country.¹⁴ Naadam connects modern Mongolians to nomadic traditions, and the power of this cultural celebration, combined with Mongolians' natural love for sports, provides a natural opening for the integration of a holistic physical education program into the school system.

Today, however, the Mongolian Ministry of Education curricula allow for physical education classes only twice a week, which translates to minimal physical activity of any kind. This is far short of recommended guidelines in the United States that call for at least 60 minutes of daily physical activity for children 6 to 17 years old.¹⁵ This physical education gap stands to negatively affect

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Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, April 2018

Mongolia's school-aged population and undermine the government's policy objectives. Vision-2050 acknowledges the important role physical fitness will play in helping Mongolia to become the resilient nation envisioned in this policy document. Within the "Healthy and Active Lifestyle" section of Vision-2050, objective 3.5 states that Mongolia will "encourage citizens and families with an active lifestyle and create an enabling environment for physical culture and sports."¹⁶ Further, objective 3.5.1 seeks to promote active lifestyles among the population and make physical fitness into a national movement.¹⁷ Mongolia's policymakers understand the importance of physical fitness, but the current curriculum design and resource disparities limit school-aged children's access to the daily physical activity needed to improve individual health and resiliency.

There are many health advantages associated with sports, games, and play, and Mongolia's education system offers an ideal space for leveraging these benefits to build physical and psychological resiliency within its school-aged population. Physical activity is universally understood to carry both tangible and intangible essential benefits,

from prevention of life-threatening diseases to feeling better about oneself and simply enjoying the excitement of competition.¹⁸ These benefits, according to one British study, include "less depression, less suppressed anger, less cynical distrust, stronger sense of coherence and less perceived stress in comparison to those who exercised less frequently."¹⁹ Further, the same study found that participating in physical activities, sports, and games is foundational to social interactions that develop trust and bonds within a society.

Given the challenges Mongolian institutions face in curbing rising suicide rates and mental health issues among their youth, harnessing the benefits that sports and physical activity provide is a simple way to combat adolescent mental-health problems and build resilient young citizens. Mongolian children could benefit from a program that promotes daily physical activity and team building as a means of reducing susceptibility to mental health difficulties. Moreover, daily exposure to sports, games, team-building activities, and exercises that build self-confidence and classroom cohesion could offer a bright spot in the lives of young Mongolians to offset the difficult



The Mongolian Sports and Education Program, Ulaanbaatar, June 2023

conditions surrounding them. There is ample evidence that people who participate in organized physical activities benefit from better mental health and are less susceptible to depression and stress.²⁰ Harnessing these forces through the adoption of a custom-made physical education program into Mongolian educational curricula is a simple but effective way to counter the persistent mental and physical health problems that stand to undermine Mongolia’s long-term human development objectives.

The Way Forward: Adoption of the NPS Program

The Mongolian Sports and Education Program, which is being developed by researchers at NPS, was piloted in Ulaanbaatar in June 2023 to great success. The program offers a range of age-appropriate sports, games, trivia, core and body-weight exercises, and team building activities that are designed to encourage daily participation and have been proven to improve focus, mood, and health. Gains in these areas could lead to better performance in school and simultaneously foster shared values and identity among children that would contribute to intrapersonal resiliency. A resilient child is more confident and better able to cope with internal and external stresses, and is

more likely to thrive as she or he grows into adulthood. The pilot program received vital support from the US Embassy and Rebel Grappling Gym, and included children from both School #130 and the Bilguunzul Foundation in Ulaanbaatar.²¹ The one-day pilot provided 32 children, their parents, and teachers from School #130 and the Bilguunzul Foundation an opportunity to preview games designed to improve physical fitness and simultaneously foster trust through cooperation and communication. Following execution of the pilot, feedback was elicited from participants to ensure that Mongolian viewpoints are informing the program’s development. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and key takeaways were derived from it through a questionnaire. The most important perceived program benefits were improvements in mood, well-being, and sense of community in the classroom. The biggest perceived challenges to the program’s adoption were access to facilities, levels of student interest and family buy-in, and community support.

The pilot program was an important first step to begin socializing the program with Mongolian stakeholders and generate vital feedback that will help guide completion of the final version of the program. The Mongolian Sports and Education Program was completed in the fall of

2023 and is ready for use during the 2023-2024 academic year. The final version of the program will have multiple sections centered around Mongolian-themed sports, games, and team-building activities that are designed for use in both rural and urban settings to enable educators to systematically engage their students in daily physical education activities. The program is available in both Mongolian and English language versions, and includes a section for children with disabilities. Finally, it contains an age-based comprehensive physical fitness test that supports the Vision-2050 objective aimed at creating a physical capabilities test for Mongolian youth and adults.²²

Conclusion

The fastest way to leverage the benefits associated with daily physical activity and simultaneously help to garner local family and community support would be for the Mongolian Ministry of Education, with US Embassy support, to adopt the Mongolian Sports and Education Program. If the ministry fully embraces this program, it could quickly foster widespread use that would allow access for schools and education-based organizations across Mongolia. Expansive access to the program would provide a broad menu of activities that includes instructions for educators on how to utilize the program on a daily basis. Importantly, access to the program would provide overtaxed teachers and parents with a resource to help improve their children's physical fitness, focus, and

sense of well-being; support better academic performance; and encourage the development of shared identity and intra-personal resiliency. These benefits are in line with Mongolia's policy aims and the basic rights of children as outlined by the United Nations.²³ This program offers a comprehensive and easy-to-use supplemental resource designed to strengthen the physical and mental health of Mongolia's youngest citizens, and contribute to the individual fortitude and resiliency future generations of Mongolians will need to carry their young democracy far beyond 2050.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Mongolian Sports and Education Program, Ulaanbaatar, June 2023



NOTES

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⁴“Vision-2050: Introduction to Mongolia’s Long-Term Development Policy Document,” Government of Mongolia, 2020, 28: <https://cabinet.gov.mn/wp-content/uploads/Alsiin-Kharaa-English-printed-Hos-1020.pdf>

⁵Ibid.

⁶Tsolmon Enkhbat and Undrakh Banzragch, *Child Rights Situation in Mongolia* (Ulaanbaatar: Save the Children Mongolia, 2018), 89: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/crsa_eng-20181225_final_for_website_0.pdf

⁷Aubrey Menard, *Young Mongols: Forging Democracy in the Wild, Wild East* (Singapore: Penguin Books, 2020), 209.

⁸Enkhbat and Banzragch, *Child Rights Situation in Mongolia*, 89.

⁹Javzan Badarch, Bayar Chuluunbaatar, Suvd Batbaatar, and Edit Paulik, “Suicide Attempts among School-Attending Adolescents in Mongolia: Associated Factors and Gender Differences,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 5 (March 2022): <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/19/5/2991>

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¹²“Early Childhood Development,” UNICEF Mongolia: <https://www.unicef.org/mongolia/early-childhood-development>

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¹⁴Antonio Graceffo, “Mongolia: Wrestling With Modernization,” *The Diplomat*, 8 July 2022: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/mongolia-wrestling-with-modernization/>

¹⁵“Bright Futures: Implementation Tip Sheet: Promoting Physical Activity,” American Academy of Pediatrics: https://downloads.aap.org/AAP/PDF/BF_PhysicalActivity_Tipsheet.pdf

¹⁶“Vision-2050,” 113.

¹⁷Ibid., 114.

¹⁸Kumar et al., “Sport Participation.”

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Gillian Street, Ray James, and Hayley Cutt, “The Relationship Between Organised Physical Recreation and Mental Health,” *Health Promotion Journal of Australia* 18, no. 3 (1 January 2007): 236–39: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1071/HE07236>

²¹For information on the Rebel Grappling Gym, which trains Mongolian children and adults in Brazilian jiu jitsu and traditional Mongolian wrestling, go to <https://Rebelgrappling.com/>; for more on the non-profit Bilguunzul Foundation for child development (in Mongolian), see <https://www.facebook.com/Bilguunzulfoundation/>

²²“Vision-2050,” 114.

²³UN General Assembly Resolution 44/25, “Convention on the Rights of the Child,” 20 November 1989: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

