

THE PRIME TIME GAMES®: IT'S INCLUSION, BUT WHO'S INCLUDING WHO?

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Team Prime Time

Abstract

The Prime Time Games (PTG) is a full inclusion after-school sports model that gives two underserved populations, youth with disabilities and low-income youth, the opportunity to compete together in the only high school sports league of its kind in the country. It was developed by Team Prime Time, a nonprofit organization based in Los Angeles, California. The success of the PTG model has allowed it to expand to schools in other parts of the U.S. This paper describes the goals, origins, and expansion of the PTG, and the involvement of the community in its support. The paper concludes with examples of how the PTG model may be implemented in other parts of the country.

Keywords: *Sports, disabilities, peers, inclusion*

It's Game Day at Fairfax High School in Los Angeles, California. At 3:30, a bus from Dorsey High School pulls into the Fairfax parking lot. Athletes and their coaches descend from the bus and head toward the school gym.

From a distance, it's hard to tell these students from any other high school basketball team, all are wearing matching warm ups—except that they tend to walk in pairs, two by two. These students have special relationships; in each pair of students, one, the athlete, has a disability—primarily developmental—and the other student, the coach, likely comes from a lower-income community. Both attend the same Title I high school. Each student is, by the nature of their circumstances, at risk of failure in school and, possibly, to achieve their true potential as adults. But the special bond between the athletes is contributing, instead, to their success in school and in life: They are playing, together, in the Prime Time Games.®

The Prime Time Games

The Prime Time Games® (“PTG”) is a full inclusion, after-school sports model that gives the Los Angeles area's two most underserved populations, low-income youth and youth with disabilities, the chance to compete together in the only high school sports league of its kind in the

country. The PTG program was developed by Team Prime Time (TPT), a Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization that provides after-school academic and sports programs at low-income middle and high schools. The PTG takes an at-risk group of students often perceived as needing mentors—low-income youth—and instead makes them peer coaches and mentors (coaches) for their peers with disabilities (athletes). Over 80% of the coaches are Latino and African American males and are from some of Los Angeles' most impoverished neighborhoods, including South Los Angeles, East Los Angeles, and Inglewood. Some of the coaches are recruited from existing school-based after-school programs; some are referred by their school's counseling office, as part of Restorative Justice programs or other initiatives designed to keep at-risk youth from dropping out of school; others are recruited from their school's athletic department as part of its commitment to leadership and character development initiatives. Athletes attend the same high school as their coaches and are eligible to participate in the PTG through age 21. The athletes have a wide range of disabilities, including autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, emotional disabilities, and physical disabilities.

Origin of the Prime Time Games®

The PTG began as a leadership training program for low-income middle school students at one Los Angeles middle school in 2003. Their neighborhoods had high rates of crime and gang presence. TPT believed that it was essential to design a program utilizing sports to demonstrate to the students and surrounding community that they were capable of making positive contributions to society if given the opportunity to do so. Students with disabilities who joined the program were mostly from middle class, upper middle class and wealthy families, and came from a broader area of Los Angeles County. Within a matter of weeks, TPT staff reported that the athletes' parents were walking up to them, somewhat curiously, and asking to meet their children's “coaches” and friends—the predominantly African American and Latino inner-city students—so they could thank them for all they were doing to help their children. The program was working; perceptions were changing. The fact that many of the students—both coach and athlete—eventually attended the same high school, helped inspire the decision



to expand the PTG to high schools in 2012. The program currently operates in 14 schools: eight in Los Angeles, two in Oakland, California; two in Sacramento, California; and two in Honolulu, Hawaii; serving approximately 225 athletes and 225 coaches each season. Each academic year is comprised of three seasons: fall soccer, winter flag football, and spring basketball.

The benefits of sports activities are well documented for students with special needs (*PALAESTRA*, 2014) but, if approached differently, can have just as profound an impact on their typical teammates. This is the essence of inclusion: that each individual participate and receive benefits. That belief defines the PTG as manifested in the Peer:Pair® model; the 1:1 pairing of coach and athlete that is the heart of the program's success.

The Season

The first two weeks of each 12-week season are dedicated to recruiting the coaches and athletes. Each school handles recruiting differently, but the most popular way is to find coaches through the high school's athletic department with teams—both boys and girls—often signing up to coach their respective sports. In fact, each PTG® season is scheduled to allow members of the traditional high school teams to participate either after their regular season has ended, or well in advance of its beginning. This allows athletic

departments utilize PTG to meet their growing emphasis on service learning, character development, and leadership training, simply by giving their students the opportunity to give other students the opportunity to give other students the “varsity experience” that so many take for granted.

Athletes are recruited to play through the special education (SPED) department. Ideally, the head coach is either a SPED classroom teacher or adapted physical education specialist (APE); someone who knows the students and their parents, and can therefore help facilitate the process. It's far more important that they know the students than the sport. The PTG comes with its own modified set of rules that everyone will have to learn. Not everyone knows the students and the families, especially when it comes to students on the autism spectrum who might not participate in APE (children with autism often are the largest pool of students in the program).

All peer coaches are able to satisfy their school's service learning and community service requirement through participation in the PTG. Some schools are offering the same academic credit toward graduation for the athletes (if they are on a graduation track). Next, a coach and an athlete are paired together in the 1:1 ratio that is the Peer:Pair®. Peer:Pairs® practice together and play together as a unit, maximizing the opportunities that each individual has to support, and learn from, one another. Creating

specific drills for each sport and modifying the rules with the intention of providing the structure and consistency for relationships to develop is a primary goal of the PTG®. Drills are intentionally very similar from sport to sport. This allows the coaches to assume greater responsibility from season to season, and athletes also become more familiar and comfortable with the drills while expediting skill mastery for the athletes. For example, passing, dribbling, and shooting drills are the same for basketball and soccer. Rules obviously vary, but all are designed around three basic concepts: controlling space, controlling pace, and safety.

Relationships that develop amongst the Peer:Pair® lead to the positive outcomes intended for the participants. The more time they spend working together, the stronger the relationship becomes. This is evidenced by the fact that 56% of the coaches participate in the PTG for a minimum of two seasons, when their Service Learning requirement only calls for one season; 72% of the athletes participate for at least two seasons. Whenever possible, Peer:Pairs® are retained as long as both coach and athlete participate. For example, C-Money (athlete) and Marguerite (coach), played six seasons together while attending HS together. Marguerite now attends the University of Southern California on a basketball scholarship. Athletes are eligible to participate until they are age 21 and/or complete high school. For many, the socialization and peer interaction is the most important aspect of the program, and the longer they participate, the more they benefit and, in turn, help improve the culture of acceptance at their school through their ongoing presence on the teams.

In its January 25, 2013 “Dear Colleague” letter, the Office for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education underscored how pervasive the opportunity gap was for students with disabilities in terms of participating in extracurricular sports, while also providing an overview of the obligations that public elementary and secondary schools have under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) to meet the growing demand. The opportunity to participate for those students who can do so with “reasonable modifications or aids” is guaranteed. Section IV of the letter, subtitled Providing Separate or Different Athletic Opportunities, states:

Students with disabilities who cannot participate in the school district’s existing extracurricular athletics program—even with reasonable modifications or aids and services—should still have an equal opportunity to receive the benefits of extracurricular athletics. When the interests and abilities of some students with disabilities cannot be as fully and effectively met by the school district’s existing extracurricular athletic program, the school district should create additional opportunities for those students with disabilities.... OCR urges school districts, in coordination with students, families, community and advocacy organizations, athletic associations, and other interested parties, to support these and other creative ways to expand such opportunities for students with disabilities. (OCR, 2013)



The PTG is an entirely new after-school sports model, built around the needs of both the underserved coach and athlete. The PTG® model recognizes that some students have disabilities and needs that cannot be overcome by “reasonable modifications or aids,” and therefore cannot participate in existing extracurricular school sports programs. The PTG® is a Separate or Different Athletic Opportunity for two underserved populations that adapts the nature of sports to meet the goals set forth for the participants. For example, in the PTG®, basketball is six-on-six, not five-on-five players. The model works best for team sports with defined positions that allow the Peer:Pairs to work together. The PTG have established eight-on-eight soccer and flag football leagues in addition to basketball, with floor hockey and baseball soon to come.

The January 2013 “Dear Colleague” Letter brought national attention to the need for inclusive extracurricular sports opportunities for high school students and, indirectly, introduced the PTG to a national audience. The program was featured in a *Wall Street Journal* article in May 2013 titled “Life Lessons on the Basketball Court: Special Needs Teens Team Up With ‘Peer Coaches, Mostly Low-Income, in Innovative Los Angeles Program” (WSJ, 2013).

Measuring Impact

Where possible, TPT assesses the PTG's short-term impact through information derived from report cards and progress reports, which are collected and evaluated by TPT staff every ten weeks. The focus here is primarily on student engagement, as evidenced through improved attendance and citizenship marks (e.g., work habits and cooperation), because such behaviors often precede academic improvement, ultimately measured in grade point. Pre- and post-participation surveys also are used to capture information that supports trends in the quantitative measures found on report cards. The "baseline" used to measure progress is the student's most recent academic profile before joining the program.

TPT assesses the long-term effectiveness of its programs by tracking the graduation rates and post-secondary success rates of its low-income students and comparing them against available LAUSD, state, and national trends. TPT works closely with third party professional evaluation firms to both define and measure program impact. According to one such firm, FdL Development, 97% of students who served as peer coaches in the PTG graduate from high school on time. Moreover, of the 97% who graduated high school on time, 85% went on to experience post-secondary success as defined as enrollment in a 2-/4-year college, trade school, military service, or full-time employment. They all attended Title I schools and live in some of the lowest-income areas of Los Angeles. The average graduation rate in Los Angeles Unified School District high schools is approximately 75% (*Los Angeles Times*, 8/9/2016).

Pre- and post-season participation surveys also are distributed to the athletes, with additional surveys gathered from their parents or guardians, and their teachers, to as-

sess impact. Some schools are merging the PTG® with APE curriculum, creating a seasonal structure that allows them to also work on IEP and/or Individualized Transition Program (ITP) goals in class and in practice, in an organic environment supported by their peers.

Professional Sports and Major University Support

The equal inclusion of the coach connects the program to the general education population as much as it does the special education population, and the combination of the two has led to significant support from university athletic programs and professional athletes. In 2010, Team Prime Time partnered with the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) football team to add a new layer to the program, "mentor the mentors." The UCLA football players would meet with TPT's middle school coaches to discuss important leadership lessons and share coaching advice they learned on their personal journeys to post-secondary education. The relationship blossomed. UCLA now hosts the Prime Time Games Championship Saturday each June, featuring more than 120 student athletes from more than a dozen interscholastic teams in what has become the UCLA Athletic Department's largest one-day community outreach program. The University of Southern California Athletic Dept. began hosting the Fall Championship Saturday in December 2016.

Professional athletes support the PTG as well. NBA Hall of Fame member and Los Angeles Lakers legend James Worthy now serves as the PTG National Basketball Commissioner. 2016 was the first year that the James Worthy Coach of the Year Award Presented by the Los Angeles Lakers, was given to the graduating senior who coached the most PTG seasons at each school. Additionally, Coaches

Two Honolulu High Schools competed in a home and home basketball game. In the first game, Roosevelt High School ("Roughriders") won on a buzzer beater (31-29) to defeat Kalani High School ("Falcons"). In the second game, Kalani overcame Roosevelt in overtime (29-25). Perhaps nothing new or novel to the typical sports reader. However, both games were played by student athletes with disabilities and those who are at-risk. Wearing school colors and uniforms, band playing alma maters, and national anthem both teams stood erect and focused on the game ahead. This was the second year of competition between both high schools. This was not your typical basketball game; this was a "real game" utilizing players and coaches who were educated by Prime Time Games (PTG). Employing a modified Peer:Pair model, the basketball games were played with the same zeal and excitement as any other basketball game. Officials were also educated and briefed on the game and rules were modified just enough to maintain the integrity of the game. Consequently, the idea of inclusionary interscholastic programs has a place in schools and PTG has provided the necessary tools for implementation. As further evidence on the value and importance of implementing PTG into this program, a doctoral dissertation emerged utilizing facets of PTG for increasing fitness levels and basketball skills for students with disabilities. The culminating home and home basketball game between both schools was the highlight of the dissertation. Lastly, as one physical educator from one of the participating schools revealed at the conclusion of games, the Accrediting Commission for Schools Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) had favorable and positive things to say about this basketball games and how it aligned with the physical education program. Needless to say, PTG was a huge part of our overall success in Honolulu.

Figure 1. Hawaii Story (from <https://scoringlive.com/story.php?storyid=15330>)

who participate in two or more seasons receive a Letter of Recommendation from Worthy to help them pursue their dream of going to college.

National Expansion Opportunities

The PTG® has grown and now features leagues of high school teams made competing against each other, in Southern California, Northern California and Honolulu (see Figure 1 for an Hawaiian success story). Team Prime Time plans to expand to other cities as well. The demand for PTG continues to grow as the push toward providing equal access to extracurricular sports for students with disabilities grows, especially if the intention is to provide access after school—as with traditional interscholastic sports—rather than during the regular school day.

The organizers of the PTG® believe it can become a national model for successful sports inclusion. Importantly, the PTG can be used as an adapted physical education curriculum; it is a viable option for schools around the country to meet the OCR’s guidance. Financial support for adapted physical education programs is always a primary concern, and the equal inclusion of the low-income peer coach creates funding channels to support the program beyond just funds allocated to special education, including 21st Century CLC funding, Title I funding, ESSA funding and private sector and foundation sources that are focused on helping students

from low-income communities overcome the opportunity and achievement gaps.

Team Prime Time leaders and staff can provide information and direction on three variations of the PTG model:

1. *Interscholastic League:* While a standard league contains a minimum of four schools, many areas begin with just two schools competing in a “Home and Home” series, giving each school the opportunity to host a game as well as travel together for an “away” game—the “Home and Home” series. Again, PTG seasons begin once the traditional high school season concludes, giving those athletes the chance to coach others in their respective sports. Leagues do not need to offer three seasons of sports in order to establish itself, nor do all of the schools need to participate in all of the sports offered.
2. *Adapted Physical Education:* Adapted Physical Education coaches utilize the PTG curriculum and merge, when possible, with either General Education Physical Education classes, or with on campus clubs / organizations to conduct practices during the regular school day. This model reduces the cost of the program significantly, as only the actual games take place after-school. The Adapted Physical Education model often begins as a “Home and Home” series, described above.





Conclusion

The PTG provide a full-inclusion sports experience for two very different groups of students who otherwise might not interact with each other, and indeed might be considered good candidates for failure or marginalization, by people who don't know them as individuals who are working together to maximize their potential. Low-income student coaches develop leadership skills; Athletes with disabilities benefit from exercise and interaction with others. Promotion of the PTG through the support of professional and college athletes and sports programs draws the attention of the community at large. The PTG demonstrate that participation in sports can transcend race, socioeconomic status, and ability, and yield benefits for all who participate.

3. *On-Campus Intramural League*: This model does not require a school to have a partner school and, as such, can be offered after-school, during the regular school day, or both. This is the most popular PTG model in participating Los Angeles middle schools.

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For more information on Team Prime Time and the Prime Time Games®, contact Executive Director Peter Straus at Peter.Straus@teamprimetime.org.

*Not their real names.

TPT has developed an online training portal, complete with videos of each peer coach training session and sport-specific drills, to assist educators in communities outside Southern California. All of the information needed for each sport can be found on the website. TPT also conducts live trainings via webinar if preferred.

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A Tale of Two Young Men

Not long ago, Eddie*, a Los Angeles-area teenager from a family living in poverty, was about to drop out of high school and join a gang. But he chose not to. When asked what motivated him to stay in school, Eddie replied, "I did not want to disappoint my athlete." Eddie had responded to a request from a special education teacher that he help some of her students with disabilities play high school sports for the first time, in the PTG. His athlete, Alex*, had autism. Eddie was his peer coach for three seasons while the two played soccer, basketball, and flag football together. That was two years ago. Eddie is now attending community college and is on track to becoming an Adapted Physical Education teacher. Alex completed high school and has enrolled in a specialized program at the same community college. He and Eddie stay in touch.

Career athletics instructor **Peter Straus** is the executive director of Team Prime Time. He founded TPT in 2001 in response to the lack of after-school opportunities for at-risk youth from low-income areas of Los Angeles. In 2003, TPT extended its programming to an additional at-risk population—children with developmental disabilities—through the creation of the Prime Time Games®, which, at the time, focused on elementary and middle school students. The Prime Time Games® HS Sports League was established in 2012.