

If you made the trip up to Sacramento last summer for the MLL All Star game, you found yourself surrounded by a crowd of passionate lacrosse players and parents. The growth of our sport in this area has been fueled in part by a creative outreach program spearheaded by Cathy Reed of the Sacramento Lacrosse Association. Three years ago, she decided that in order to grow the game there needed to be more ways children in the Sacramento area could get early exposure to the game of lacrosse. With that goal in mind, she began a program that has allowed thousands of local students, primarily in the fourth through sixth grades, a chance to experience the game of lacrosse using the US Lacrosse Soft Stick PE curriculum as part of their regular physical education programming. Her efforts to work directly with the school district go beyond getting a curriculum guide and equipment into the hands of PE teachers. Cathy has developed a model that combines those offerings with direct efforts to support district PE teachers. She provides teachers with a dynamic hands on experience playing and learning about the game of lacrosse, followed up by volunteers showing up with equipment at their school and providing additional support during their first days of teaching lacrosse skills to students. This is truly a joint effort between volunteers from the local lacrosse clubs and PE teachers working in the schools. It has been extremely successful as a way to increase access to lacrosse for all children in the Sacramento area. We wanted to share with all of you some of the key elements of the journey Cathy and Sacramento Lacrosse Association have taken to contribute to our collective desire to grow the game.

Once Cathy determined that getting the US Lacrosse Soft Stick PE programming into local schools would be the best way to expand access to a wider audience of children, her first step was to talk to the parents of elementary school students already participating in the Sacramento Lacrosse Association program. Through conversations with parents, she was able to learn that within the local schools there was a Physical Education lead teacher. This person serves as a key point person and takes charge of creating professional development training programs for the PE teachers working in the Sacramento area elementary schools during their Inservice days. Cathy was able to arrange to bring a small group of coaches and equipment to an Inservice Day where the PE teachers could learn about the game of lacrosse, the ease of using the soft stick program to teach basic skills, and the fun of running simple 7 v 7 games. The teachers themselves became the students as Cathy and her team of volunteer coaches modeled the exact instructional clinic she was offering to support them in bringing into their schools. Her goal was to give them exposure to the sport, a basic level of understanding of the curriculum, and then an offer to follow up with direct support within their school setting. Prior to the Inservice Day, Cathy recruited as many volunteers from her coaching ranks as she could. She signed up anyone who was willing to take a few hours during a school day to show up and help an interested teacher to lead the first day, or two, of Soft Stick lacrosse instruction. While at the Inservice Day, Cathy explained this offer and provided teachers with a 10 week time frame for support. This is where Cathy was extremely compassionate in her approach to the teachers and the challenges of their work. She did not pre-determine the dates and times. Instead, she took on the challenge of letting teachers contact her with their needs and then she did her best to meet them. Using the soft stick curriculum from US Lacrosse and the support of borrowed equipment from the NorCal chapter, she and her team of volunteers taught teachers

and students how to scoop, throw and catch. Whenever possible, Cathy would leave the equipment she was loaning to the school there for at least a full week. Depending on the structure of the schedule, volunteers were sometimes able to guide some students onto more advanced skills like taking shots on goals and even 7 v 7 games. One of the helpful aspects of the soft stick program is that boys and girls play the game together and there is no real contact or risk of serious injury.

US Lacrosse learned of the success of the program and has since provided direct support in the form of donated soft stick packages, which Cathy and her team of volunteers are now able to leave behind with each school that engages in the training program. Each year she recruits new volunteers and partners them with veterans who can help them learn how to run the clinics. This program has been extremely successful in increasing awareness of the sport in the Sacramento region. The relationships Cathy has built with the PE teachers remains strong and she regularly hears from teachers who may be looking to add a few more sticks to their supply, or who have moved to a new school that does not have any equipment with the hope of getting a package for their new location. By providing the school district with this very supportive and positive interaction, Cathy has extended the game of lacrosse not just to the children, but to many adults who had little to no prior exposure to the game.

Another key connection Cathy builds through her onsite support at the elementary schools comes through her decision to hand out rubber wristbands to the children rather than trying give them paper flyers. The wrist bands have the Sacramento Lacrosse Association website address imprinted on them so that interested students can go home and get access to listings of local program options and free clinics. Cathy runs the program in the fall, when her coaching volunteers have more time to give. Giving parents an online connection to the local lacrosse community is more effective than trying to give exact details about all the clinics that might be offered in the spring. Cathy has been as inclusive as possible in terms of her outreach, seeking volunteers from any local teams and providing information on the Sacramento Lacrosse Association website about all teams and programs available to students within the school district. Her goal is to grow the overall number of participants, and to make sure families know about options that are closest to them.

Cathy has now repeated this program successfully for 3 years, reaching 2-3,000 students each time. She is certain that the chance for the PE teachers to feel like kids during the Inservice Day has been a big part of the success. They get a feel for the dynamic nature of the sport and how it will be for the kids. This also builds teacher confidence in their ability to teach a sport they many never have played before. When you get the STX package it has rules on how to play 7v7 that are well written and come with an easy diagram. There is no hard and fast rule about where students play, it can be inside or outside, on a field or a court. The US Lacrosse curriculum provides many drawings illustrating basic skills which has been a great tool for helping ELL students and visual learners to see what it is they need to do. Both girls and boys participation levels have grown since Cathy began. The program has been mainly focused on fourth through sixth graders, but they have worked with younger and older age groups as well.

Her next goal is to target middle school students through a partnership with the recreation departments who offer competitive intramural programming for this age group. We will keep you posted on her successes and lessons learned as she forges ahead on that front.

For those who might want to follow in Cathy's footsteps, below you will find a short list of key lessons she has learned if you are thinking of trying to implement this kind of program within your local school district.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- Do some legwork up front to learn about the key contact people within your school district. Make sure you help them to understand your goals, and try to eliminate paperwork and screening of volunteers. All volunteers work under the direct supervision of a teacher and are never alone with students. They meet the teacher and students out on the field to support the teacher in running the clinics.
- Line up as many volunteers and possible from all your local lacrosse organizations regardless whether they target competitive players or those with mixed skill levels. For basic skill instruction even parents who are not coaches can be great volunteers. Do not worry about how much time they can give, even someone who can give two hours worth of time can help as you try to fill up the calendar.
- Be flexible and understanding of the challenges faced by the teachers in organizing their classes and do what you can to meet their needs.
- Start small- target 3-4 schools your first year. Cathy has been getting into 10-12 schools a year and that is a massive undertaking in terms of the facilitation and coordination of volunteers and equipment.
- As you get going, know that you will constantly want to recruit new volunteers and to partner them with your returning volunteers. Coaches will vary in their ability to donate their time year over year, so a steady influx of new people is essential.
- Use a broad community approach, your goal is to grow exposure to the game and not the rosters of any one club team. Be inclusive and supportive of all programs in your area.