

Athena's Adventures in Health Policy

KEEP MOVING



**FOR AGES
12-17**

By Ana Rita Gonzalez and Priyanka Dahiya
Illustrated by Melina Sugliano

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CHAPTER 1: PE CREDIT

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PE CREDIT

For the first time in her life, Athena reviewed her course list for the semester and wished she didn't have to go to school.

"Oh, come on." Her friend Conroy closed her laptop in her face. "You have *got* to stop looking at that. It's the same as it was yesterday."

"Yes, but I still hate it." Athena crossed her arms, irritated. "Why aren't *you* enrolled in physical education?"

Conroy laughed. "Zosia and I took PE class way back in sixth grade. It's your turn—and Hui's. At least you won't be alone in your misery."

Athena sighed. Their friend Hui dreaded team sports and generally refused to participate in group exercise. Athena, on the other hand, was on the school swim team, a hobby she planned to continue in high school.

"I should get a free pass," she complained. "I'm getting plenty of physical education already."

Conroy rolled his eyes, pulling her away from her desk. "Let's go. You'll feel better once you've had a snack."

Athena doubted this but followed her friend downstairs anyway. All she wanted was to pursue a

career in public health—*not* athletics. A whole semester of physical education felt like a profound waste of her time.

But it was *required*. If she wanted to move into high school, she had to pass PE.

“What if I pay you to take it for me?” Athena joked, poking Conroy in the arm as he pulled a box of crackers out of her pantry.

“That would work... if Coach Manisha were blind.”

Athena groaned. She couldn’t wait to graduate from middle school in just a few months.

The final semester of eighth grade began in a whirlwind of activity. Athena was happy to be back at school... if she didn’t think about PE class. She sat with her friends at lunch and chatted about their plans for the weekend. When her science partner got squeamish about dissecting a crayfish, she offered to do it herself. Athena *loved* science experiments. She also enjoyed language arts, math, and social studies—all her other classes.

But at the end of the day, when it could no longer be avoided, she still had to walk down to the gymnasium for PE.

“This is going to be terrible,” said Hui, walking beside her. “I can’t believe we’re stuck in this class for the entire semester.”

Athena couldn’t believe it either—but she was

tired of saying so. “Let’s try to be optimistic, okay? Maybe we’ll learn something.”

Hui’s backpack was much too heavy for her. She looked like a turtle when she pulled open the door to the gym. “I doubt it.”

Athena gave a short laugh. “That’s the spirit.”

Inside, Coach Manisha was waiting, holding a stack of paper. “Welcome, girls,” she said, handing them each a sheet. “Here’s a questionnaire for you. It should take about fifteen minutes to complete. Feel free to sit anywhere you like.”

Nodding, Athena and Hui joined their peers on the floor of the gym and dug pencils out of their backpacks. Reviewing the questionnaire from top to bottom, Athena recognized that Coach Manisha wanted to understand the students’ current physical activity levels.

This class was going to be a piece of cake.

On the first few lines of her paper, Athena explained that she swam during the school year and played volleyball during the summer. It was at least a few hours of physical activity per week, sometimes more. Plus, on days when she didn’t swim or play volleyball, she practiced strength training, which benefited her performance.

At the bottom of the page, Coach Manisha asked about each student’s screen time. This was also straightforward for Athena since her parents limited her to two hours per day. If she needed more time to finish her homework, that was fine, but recreationally, her ability

to watch TV and play video games was regulated.

Fifteen minutes later, when the coach collected the questionnaires, Hui looked like she was going to be sick. “I think I failed that,” she whispered to Athena.

“You can’t fail a questionnaire, Hui.”

“Oh, I’m sure I can.”

A couple of days later, when Athena went to PE class for the second time, Coach Manisha looked grim. She paced in front of the students, who were once again seated on the gymnasium floor. After a few moments of thoughtful frowning, she turned to face them. “I have to say, I’m quite concerned about your physical activity levels. Most of you aren’t exercising for an adequate amount of time each week, if at all.”

Shocked, Athena’s eyes flicked to Hui, who was seated beside her. Is this what she meant by “failed?” Didn’t Hui exercise at all, even by herself?

“You’re also not practicing with enough intensity,” Coach Manisha continued. She was pacing again, as if trying to make up for the sedentary nature of her students. “And some of you are focusing too heavily on strength, flexibility, balance, or cardio, rather than a combination.”

Now, Athena frowned to herself. Was her exercise routine well-balanced? She considered the skills required

to swim competitively and decided that yes, she was doing her best.

But the coach still wasn't finished. "Most of you are spending an excessive amount of time on your screens. Do your parents know that?" Without waiting for a response, she added, "I have an email going out to them later today. Until then, we're going to discuss health policy."

It was Hui's turn to look shocked. She turned to Athena, conscious that health policy was her favorite topic.

Pulling her mobile whiteboard closer to the students, Coach Manisha picked up a red marker and asked, "Does anyone know what health policy is?"

Smiling, Athena raised her hand. "Health policies are rules made by governments to keep everyone in a community healthy."

"Correct. Thank you, Athena." The coach wrote this definition on the whiteboard, then said, "Physical activity is more than participating in a specific sport or game. It has a range of health benefits, including improved fitness, cardiovascular health, bone health, and mental health. It also teaches good sportsmanship, discipline, and teamwork, which are valuable throughout life. We miss out on so much when we don't exercise."

Athena knew this to be true. When she broke her wrist in elementary school, she couldn't swim for weeks. As she recalled, she was afraid she would never get back

in the pool, and when she finally did, she felt weak. Now that she was on her middle school swim team, she knew the value of good sportsmanship and teamwork. But without her commitment to physical activity, she might not have learned those lessons until later in life. She could hardly imagine it.

“These are policies from the World Health Organization,” said Coach Manisha, bringing Athena back to the present. The coach was passing out infographics to each of the students. “The WHO recommends that children and adolescents spend at least an hour per day participating in moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity, most of which should be aerobic. On at least three days a week, vigorous-intensity aerobic activities, as well as muscle- and bone-strengtheners, should be included.”

Hui raised her hand. “What does *aerobic* mean?”

“Aerobic exercise requires continual movement and is powered by oxygen,” the coach explained. “*Anaerobic* exercise happens in short bursts and is powered by the energy in your muscles.”

Hui nodded, looking slightly confused.

“I don’t normally do this, but I’m assigning you all a semester-long project,” Coach Manisha announced, and a groan circulated around the gym. “Oh, no—I don’t want to hear any whining. This is an opportunity for you all to learn the value of physical activity. Understood?”

The class nodded, resigned. Secretly, Athena couldn’t

wait to learn more about the assignment—and she didn't have to wait long.

“I want each of you to find a form of exercise that you enjoy and incorporate movement into every day. I also want each of you to create a presentation to help our school improve its overall physical activity level.” After a pause, Coach Manisha added, “The strongest presentations will be delivered before an assembly.”

Athena did not love PE class—that was true—but she did love health policy. She felt like this project was designed just for her.

She couldn't wait to get started.



CHAPTER 2: QUALITY PE

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“Have you chosen a topic for your PE presentation?”

Athena looked up from her homework to find Hui lying on the floor of her room. “I finally decided last night. I want to create a presentation about quality physical education and what that means. That way, I’ll learn something, help others learn, and hopefully start to appreciate the class.” Athena took a deep breath. “Have you chosen your topic?”

Hui shook her head. “Not even close. And honestly? I’m going to fail this class anyway, so it doesn’t really matter.”

“Of course it does,” Athena argued. She was getting tired of Hui being so hard on herself. “I can help you brainstorm some ideas if you want.”

“No, thank you. I’ll take this loss by myself.”

Exasperated, Athena shoved her laptop, textbooks, and notes into her backpack. “I’m heading home for dinner. Let me know if you change your mind, okay?”

Hui gave her a wordless thumbs-up. Athena slung her bag over one shoulder and walked home.

Despite her friend's lack of enthusiasm, Athena began researching health policies about quality physical education that evening. According to the WHO, she read, students should be taught how to stay physically active throughout life. To achieve this goal, schools require a comprehensive curriculum, certain policies and environmental factors, proper instruction, and student assessment.

In her notebook, Athena wrote: *Assessments should account for personal improvement and effort. Students should not be compared with others.* She wondered if that was how Coach Manisha would grade her PE class. If so, it would be good news for Hui—assuming she decided to try her best.

No one could be great at every sport. But based on the WHO's guidelines, if they put in the effort to improve, every student should pass PE.

Before she wrapped up her homework for the night, Athena made herself one more note: *Find a quote from a famous athlete.* She wanted her presentation to inspire her class, if not the entire school. If she could find a great quote from a professional athlete, she would be golden.

For the next couple of weeks, Athena observed Coach Manisha's teaching style and compared it with the WHO's

guidelines, taking pages of notes for her presentation. Based on everything Athena had learned so far, Coach Manisha was an excellent instructor.

“During our first few weeks of class, we’ll be focused on running,” she explained. “To begin, I’ll assess your ability to run one mile. Don’t worry about being faster than anybody else—just do your best. Your speed will improve as we practice.”

Athena put on her bravest, most unconcerned face. She absolutely *dreaded* running.

Nonetheless, she and her classmates made their way to the field, and Coach Manisha pulled out her stopwatch. “On your mark, get set, go!”

Quick and light on her feet, Athena began at the front of the pack. But the longer she ran, the more exhausted she felt, and Coach Manisha clocked her final time at nine minutes.

“Nice work, Athena. That’s a strong starting time for a girl your age.”

Athena was panting, hands on her knees, simply trying to keep from lying on the ground. She felt anything but strong. She was at her best in the water, and running was nothing but land, land, land.

“How... are we going... to improve?” she gasped.

The coach smiled. “You’ll see.”

A couple of days later, Athena *did* see—and was less than thrilled. To improve their speed, Coach Manisha said, the students would need to train to run *more* than

one mile. “This will build up your endurance,” she told them. “It won’t be easy, but your speed will increase steadily.”

The students were instructed to run a few times a week, at least one mile but more if they could manage it. Athena always took her assignments seriously, and this one was no different. By the end of the week, she could run two miles without wanting to collapse, and her time was down by thirty seconds per mile. Shocked, she noted these details for her presentation.

Back in PE, Coach Manisha taught the students a series of warm-up drills to improve their form, further increasing their speed. Then, when she was confident that everyone was ready, she began leading them over hills.

Athena didn’t think she could dislike running any more than she already did, but running over hills was the *worst*. On “hill days,” she and Hui ran at the back of the class. Hui was fast—even faster than Athena—but her endurance levels were low, and she tired quickly.

“Do... you think... we’re improving?” she panted. Despite the winter wind, Hui was sweating through her shirt, her bangs plastered to her forehead.

Facing their final hill of the day, Athena gasped, “I sure hope so.”

No matter how much she disliked it, she recognized that Coach Manisha’s curriculum was comprehensive and actionable, two things that the WHO took seriously.

It suddenly occurred to her that she didn't have to enjoy running to respect PE class or value her place in it.

Athena smiled to herself as she reentered the gymnasium. She was beginning to appreciate the class, just as she'd anticipated.

She *knew* quality physical education was a good topic for her presentation.

"What are some ways to keep your energy levels up and your bodies strong?" Coach Manisha asked the class one afternoon.

Hui raised her hand, surprising Athena. "How about nutrition policies?"

"Very good." The coach nodded, adding Hui's answer to the whiteboard. "Eating nutritious meals and avoiding sugary drinks and junk food are excellent habits, no matter your physical goals. What else?"

"We can keep running and timing ourselves outside of school," Athena suggested. "That keeps us strong and improves our endurance."

"That's true," Coach Manisha agreed, "but it's also important to rest. Rest gives our bodies time to recover, which is vital to achieving our fitness goals."

Athena nodded, only half-listening. *Rest is for people who aren't as active as me*, she thought. *If I'm sleeping well at night, I don't need a break.*

And she *was* sleeping well. She didn't have a choice. Outside of school and running practice, she was still training in the pool multiple times a week. By the end of the day, she was exhausted—and still had homework to complete. She often fell asleep at her desk, only to be woken up by her little sister screaming, “Athena! Dinnertime!”

But none of that was a big deal. Had she really expected her final semester of middle school to be easy?

Ha.

Athena was *fine*. Her grades were fine. Her swimming pace was fine.

Everything was fine.

A couple of weeks passed. By the time Athena's project outline was due, she had filled and organized pages of notes, unsure if she would have space in her presentation for everything she wanted to cover. On its own, her outline was nearly five pages long. Athena kept her fingers crossed, hopeful that Coach Manisha wouldn't find it too detailed.

But a few days after she turned in her outline, Athena was asked to stay after PE class. *I knew it*, she fretted. *It's too long.*

The coach held up Athena's project notes and smiled. “This is some excellent content, miss. I'm impressed.”

Eyes wide, Athena whispered, “Really?”

“Absolutely. Your topic is comprehensive and actionable—just like a good PE curriculum—and your research is impeccable.”

Athena grinned. People who cared about health policy were her favorite people. “So... what’s the problem?”

“No problem,” said the coach, shuffling papers around on her desk. “I was wondering if you’d be open to helping a few of your classmates with their projects. Not everyone’s pitch was as strong as yours, to say the least.”

“I would love to,” Athena replied. “This is my favorite part of PE class.”

Coach Manisha laughed. “I had a feeling. But are you sure you have time for this? If not, I’ll find another tutor.”

“I can do it.” Athena nodded to back up the words. “I can make time.” *I hope.*

“Great.” The coach handed her a short stack of outlines, the topmost of which was Hui’s. “Here are the names of your classmates who could use some help. Email me if you have any questions, okay?”



CHAPTER 3: ACTIVE TRAVEL

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The day that Coach Manisha's unit on running finally ended, Athena thought she might burst with joy. No more laps around the field, no more *hills*. Whatever came next, it would feel easy by comparison.

"We're going to turn our attention to a team sport," the coach announced. She disappeared into the equipment room and reemerged a moment later with an orange ball in one hand.

Athena grinned. She always wanted to learn how to play basketball, but she never found the time. Now, she was *required* to play.

PE was swiftly becoming her favorite class.

She turned to Hui, still smiling, only to find terror in her friend's brown eyes. For a moment, Athena had forgotten how challenging it was for Hui to participate in team sports. Her anxiety often stood between her and the joy of the game.

"It's all right," Athena whispered, squeezing Hui's hand. "I'll be with you the whole time."

Hui nodded, gripping Athena's hand in reply.

Coach Manisha divided the class into two teams, making sure Athena and Hui were on the same one.

They pulled blue jerseys over their shirts as the opposing team donned yellow. But despite Athena's repeated attempts to get her friend's attention, Hui was in her own world, trembling slightly as she stared at the floor. She looked like she wanted to disappear.

I can't fix this for her, Athena reminded herself. Hui would play or she wouldn't—and either way, it was her choice. Athena hadn't reviewed her friend's project outline yet, but based on her current level of enthusiasm, it was safe to assume it wasn't her best work.

Coach Manisha blew her whistle. "Okay, students, let's begin with an assessment. I want everyone to take a basketball and demonstrate their ability to dribble. Don't worry if you've never done this before; I'll begin teaching you the basics later this week."

Athena had been to her brother's basketball games and was familiar with dribbling. Lining up her fingers along the seams of the ball, she began bouncing it against the floor.

"Solid technique, Athena," the coach commended her. "Have you played before?"

Athena shook her head. "Just watched."

"Well, keep up the good work."

Nodding in reply, Athena shifted her gaze to find Hui halfheartedly chasing after her basketball. She didn't look frustrated—just disinterested. The sight made Athena sigh.

During the second half of class, Coach Manisha

guided the students through a quick basketball game. Though nearly everyone had played before, no one was overly skilled, a fact that the coach noted in her assessment.

When the bell rang and the students were dismissed for the day, Athena pulled Hui aside, whispering, “Come on. I’m going to show you how to dribble.”

Hui rolled her eyes. “Why bother? It’s not like I’m going to join the basketball team.”

“No, but at least you’ll feel comfortable on the court.”

When the last of their peers left the gymnasium, Athena threw a basketball to Hui and grabbed a second one for herself. “Now, line your fingers up on the seams—like this. You don’t want the ball to bounce too high. Keep it nice and controlled.”

Hui raised an eyebrow. “How do you know this?”

“I’ve been to tons of Odin’s games, remember?”

Sighing, Hui whined, “I’d rather have your help with my project outline. This feels like a waste of time.”

“We’ll work on your project in a bit,” Athena promised. “Right now, let’s just play.”

Without a class full of people to distract her, Hui was good at basketball. *Great*, in fact. Athena tried to contain her surprise, but by the end of their practice session, Hui

was laughing. “You didn’t think I could do it, did you?”

“I *knew* you could do it,” Athena said. “I just didn’t know you were so talented. Are you sure you don’t want to try out for the team?”

Hui’s smile faded. “I’m positive. I don’t want to play in front of all those people.”

Raising her hands in surrender, Athena said, “That’s fine. I just had to ask.”

Together, the girls made their way to a quiet study hall and began reviewing Hui’s project outline. Athena saw that it was a single paragraph about active travel to and from school. “Where did you learn about this?” she asked, her eyes scanning Hui’s minimal research.

“The World Health Organization’s website.” Hui hid her face in her hands. “It’s terrible, isn’t it? I know it’s important that students be able to walk or bike to school, but I don’t know what else to say about it. There’s not enough content to create an entire presentation.”

For a long moment, Athena was silent, thinking. At last, she suggested, “Why don’t you look at my project outline? Maybe we can do something similar with your topic.”

“How?” Hui demanded, accepting the stack of paper Athena offered her. “Did you really get four pages of notes out of *quality PE*?”

Athena laughed. “If we focus on the policies and environmental factors related to active travel, your outline will be long, too—I promise.”

“I don’t need it to be long,” said Hui. “I just need it to be *good*.” Sighing, she added, “What sorts of policies are related to active travel?”

“Well, bike lanes, for starters. They make it safer for students to bike to and from school. When I started riding my bike to the elementary campus in fourth grade, bike lanes helped me feel safe on the road.”

Suddenly, Hui perked up. “What if I turned my presentation into a safety training session? I can talk about bike lanes and—other stuff. There is other stuff, right?”

Athena opened her laptop, smiling. “There’s plenty. Let’s do some research, okay? The WHO has all sorts of resources about active travel.”

In the hour that followed, the girls learned how important it is to cross the street only in a crosswalk, obey crossing guards and signals, never accept a ride from a stranger, and avoid earbuds and texting while walking.

At the last point, Hui looked slightly offended. “Everyone wears earbuds when they go for walks,” she argued. “What’s the big deal?”

Frowning, Athena pointed out, “What if you were walking along the side of the road and didn’t hear a car driving up behind you? We have to pay attention to our surroundings to stay safe.”

“Or we could just walk with a friend.”

“That *is* an important policy—but why would you

wear headphones while walking with a friend?”

Hui rolled her eyes. “Good point.”

Further investigation revealed that when biking to school, it’s important to obey all traffic laws, stay alert, and watch for parked cars.

“That seems pretty self-explanatory, but I’ll include it anyway,” Hui said, jotting down the last of her notes. “Thanks, Thea. I would’ve flunked this thing without you.”

“Happy to help.” Athena returned her laptop to her backpack, checking the clock above the door as she did. “I’m about to be late for swim practice, but text me later, okay?”

Without waiting for a reply, Athena slung her bag over her shoulder and ran for the pool. It wasn’t until she was in motion that she realized how tired she was—possibly too tired to swim. But that wasn’t an option. She had to keep training so she would be ready to compete with the rest of her team.

“You’re late, Athena!” Coach Shannon yelled from the bleachers.

“Sorry!” Athena hurried toward the locker room to change. “I was helping a friend with her PE project.”

“Do I hear excuses?”

Athena sighed. “No. I’ll be ready in five minutes.”

“Make it two!”

Energized by—or perhaps anxious about—this exchange, Athena pulled on her swimsuit, swimming cap, and goggles, and made her way back to the pool

for drills. But the water felt strangely heavy today, her limbs leaden, and when she saw her final swim times, all she could do was cringe.

“Are you getting enough rest, Thea?” Coach Shannon asked. Without the echo of the pool between them, her tone was softer and kinder.

Surprised by the tears in her eyes, Athena shrugged. “I’m fine—just having an off day.”

But for the first time all year, she questioned if that was true.



CHAPTER 4:
BEFORE AND AFTER
SCHOOL PROGRAMS

CHAPTER 4: BEFORE AND AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Athena knew she would enjoy basketball, but as she and her classmates improved their technique through practice drills and strength training, she came to like it even more. The competition between teams was fierce, and everyone strived to play their best—including Hui.

Now that she was more comfortable on the court, Hui was practically unbeatable. She was voted team captain during their second week of playing. Even Coach Manisha struggled to find flaws in her performance.

“Don’t stare at the floor, Hui!” the coach would yell over the sound of sneakers squeaking. “You’re doing great!”

And with that squared away, Athena was free to focus on her next tutoring session, this one with a boy named Talib.

They agreed to meet in a study hall during lunch. It was supposed to be Athena’s singular break during the school day, but she’d seen Talib’s outline, and... well... it wasn’t going to earn a passing grade. She could eat her turkey sandwich and help him at the same time.

“I want to talk about active before and after school programs,” Talib explained, watching as Athena unpacked

her lunchbox. “I just don’t know what should be included.”

Athena nodded, her mouth full. After a moment, she asked, “Did you research any policies on this topic?”

Talib frowned. “There are policies for school programs?”

“Of course.” Athena took a sip of water, opened her laptop, and shifted so he could see the screen. “Let’s check the CDC website. They have lots of great resources.”

“How do you know?”

Athena shrugged. “I do this for fun.” Cramming in another bite of turkey sandwich, she pointed to her screen and said, “See? There are all kinds of policies for active before and after school programs.”

“*Physical activity clubs*,” Talib read. “Our school has those.”

Athena nodded. “We also have intramural sports, which are open to the community. That’s an important policy, too, because it brings people together.”

“This is great!” Talib pulled his notebook from his backpack and began writing. “What else does the CDC say?”

“Well, interscholastic sports are another big category. Those are competitive, like the school swim team.”

“Oh, that’s right—you’re on the team, aren’t you? How do you have time for all this?”

I don’t, Athena thought to herself. But she wasn’t

going to say that to Talib.

“I make time for things that matter,” she said. “Physical activity is one of those things.”

Talib nodded, distracted. “But why does this stuff matter in the *long term*? Just because we’re active during our school years doesn’t mean we’ll be active as adults, does it?”

“Actually, based on my research, school programs encourage students to stay active throughout life and can even improve our grades.” She tapped her screen again, saying, “See? It says so right here.”

“Really? That would be a huge relief.” Talib sighed. “My grades are kind of slipping right now. I need this presentation to go well.”

“It will,” Athena promised. “Why don’t we check the UNICEF website for more information?”

Further research revealed the importance of unstructured time, especially in low- and middle-income countries. It gives children the opportunity to play without rules or restrictions, which is important for their physical, mental, emotional, and social health.

“I’ve never thought about this before, but it makes sense,” said Talib. “Unstructured playtime is great for mental health. It helps with imagination and creativity.”

“Exactly.” Athena popped a couple of grapes into her mouth and closed her lunchbox. “And according to UNICEF, it builds problem-solving skills, which apply to social health.”

Talib closed his notebook. “Thanks for your help, Athena. I think I might actually pass PE.”

“Of course.” Athena watched as Talib left the study hall. Then, she shoved her laptop into her backpack, grabbed her lunchbox, and ran to her next class. She had eaten too quickly and was paying for it with a stomachache.

But she didn’t have time to think about that.

When the bell rang, Athena dashed straight from her last class of the day to the pool. She couldn’t afford to be late again.

But as she prepared to dive, she wondered if she had ever been this tired before. Her head pounded. Her feet hurt from running all over the school in the wrong shoes. She couldn’t believe it. After all, she was young! She was healthy!

So, why did she feel totally awful?

Coach Shannon blew into her whistle, and Athena dove into the water with a splash. *Not a very clean start*, she thought, and her performance only worsened from there.

“Talk to me, Athena.” The coach was reviewing her recent swim times with confusion and concern. “This is very unlike you. Are you sure you can compete this weekend?”

“Of course,” Athena said, hugging a towel around

her body. She wasn't usually this cold after swimming. What was happening to her? "I can compete. I probably just stayed up too late last night. I had a lot of homework."

Coach Shannon looked unconvinced. "Promise me that you'll rest before this weekend. These swim times aren't doing you or your teammates any favors."

Athena gave her coach a pained smile. She had no idea what she was asking of her. Athena's calendar was overflowing with school, swim practice, homework, and tutoring. She would be lucky if she got enough sleep, let alone time to relax and unwind.

"I promise," she said, adding to herself, *I'll rest when all of this is over.*



CHAPTER 5: REST AND RECOVERY

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At 6 AM on Saturday morning, Athena was vomiting in the trash can next to her bed.

Squeezing her eyes shut against the pounding in her head, she leaned back on her pillows and tried to take some deep breaths. Unfortunately, the best she could do was cough—hard. Pulling her blankets up under her chin, she checked the time again.

Her swim meet would start in four hours. There wasn't a chance she could compete like this.

With tears trickling onto her cheeks, she reached for her phone and pulled up her text thread with Coach Shannon.

Hey, she typed. I just woke up sick. So sorry to bail on everyone, but I can't swim today. Best of luck to the team. Let me know how it goes!

Without bothering to read over her message, Athena hit send, rolled onto her side, and inched her way out of bed to brush her teeth. She wasn't exactly sure where the tears were coming from—disappointment, exhaustion, pain—but now, she was free to let them flow.

Her complexion in the bathroom mirror looked a bit green. She splashed cold water on her face, brushed

her teeth, and went back to her room.

Sick, she wrote on a sticky note. She attached it to her bedside lamp, just in case her parents came looking for her.

Then, she put on a sweatshirt, crawled into bed, and went back to sleep.

On Monday morning, Athena woke to birds chirping outside her window—a reminder that spring was on the way.

It was a fitting gesture by Mother Nature. After a weekend of rest, Athena felt like a new person. For two full days, she did nothing but relax. She got plenty of sleep, read a book on leadership in health policy, ate the soup that her mom made for her, and cancelled all her social events.

It was wonderful. She wanted to tell everyone she knew about the magic of rest.

But her coaches were one step ahead of her. As soon as Athena arrived at school that morning, she was whisked into a conference room with both Coach Manisha and Coach Shannon.

“We’re concerned about you, Thea,” Coach Shannon said gently.

“We know you’re passionate about your various activities,” said Coach Manisha, “but we need you to

schedule rest *regularly*, not just when you're too sick to leave home."

"*Especially* if you want to stay on the swim team," added Coach Shannon. "Your teammates are counting on you—but you know that."

Eyes on the floor, Athena nodded. "I promise to make time for rest. I forgot how much I hate being sick. And of course, I love to swim." Finally, she met Coach Shannon's eyes. "Is my spot on the team in jeopardy?"

Her swim coach smiled. "Consider this a warning; I know you're dedicated to the sport. But you do owe your teammates an apology. Without you, the meet fell flat."

Again, Athena nodded. "I texted them yesterday, and I'll apologize again when I see them today."

"And are you sure you still have time to tutor your PE classmates?" Coach Manisha asked. "You can say no."

Eyes closed, Athena considered the time commitment. She still had three students to meet with, which felt like a lot. But... "If I combine two of my sessions, I'll be fine. I'll have more time to rest, and maybe Saffi and Wilbur can help each other. I think their topics are similar."

Coach Manisha smiled. "Good thinking, honey. Let me know if you need any support, okay?"

"Okay," Athena said. And this time, she meant it.



CHAPTER 6:
ACTIVE CLASSROOMS
AND RECESS

CHAPTER 6: ACTIVE CLASSROOMS AND RECESS

When their unit on basketball ended, Coach Manisha's entire PE class was filled with disappointment. Everyone had enjoyed it, especially Athena and Hui. Returning to an individual sport felt like a crime—especially since their new unit was on yoga.

Athena couldn't believe it. After weeks of competitive activity, the coach was regulating the class to slow, boring, *yoga*? It was going to be torturous.

Except, after thirty minutes of deep breathing and downward-facing dog, Athena felt... calm. Centered. Grounded. She loved the soothing background music and appreciated the opportunity to stretch before swim practice. Coach Shannon was always telling her how important it is to stretch, but Athena had never experienced the benefits until now. She felt somehow taller and more graceful in the pool. It was like magic.

Coach Manisha did this on purpose, to help me relax, Athena guessed. But she wasn't going to complain about it.

Athena arrived at her second-to-last tutoring session well-rested and ready to help. Her classmates, Saffi and Wilbur, had chosen complementary topics: active classrooms and active recess. With any luck, they would be able to help each other flesh out their presentation ideas, and Athena could track down the appropriate health policies for them to reference.

“I know active classrooms are important,” said Saffi. “I just don’t know how to tell other people about them. It’s all jumbled up in my head.”

“Well, with complex topics, it’s important to start with the facts,” Athena said, opening her browser. “Policies are some of the best facts we have.”

“There are policies for active classrooms?”

“Of course.” Athena pointed to her laptop screen. “Studies have shown that active classrooms help improve concentration, reduce disruptive behavior, improve motivation levels, and achieve higher test scores.”

But Saffi didn’t look convinced. “How? I thought active classrooms improved physical fitness; I didn’t know about the rest of this stuff.”

Scrolling further down the page, Athena read, “Teachers can bring students on a nature walk around campus, and classes can act out the stories they’re reading in literature. Not all activity is based on strengthening or stretching.”

“But stretching is a good movement break during class,” Saffi said. “I read that during my initial research.”

“And you should definitely include that in your presentation.” Athena smiled. Did Saffi actually want tutoring? It was hard to tell.

Nodding, Saffi said, “Okay, that’s enough for me. What about you, Wilbur?”

Wilbur looked distraught, having run his fingers through his hair so many times that it was standing straight up. “My presentation is about active recess. I think middle schools should have recess time, just like elementary schools. Is that crazy?”

“Yes,” said Saffi, and Athena shushed her. So much for her classmates helping each other.

“Why do you think recess is important?” Athena asked.

Wilbur sighed. “At first, I just thought it would be fun. But now, I think I can find some health policies to make a stronger case.”

Grinning, Athena said, “Let’s find out.” Opening a new browser window, they began searching for anything that would substantiate Wilbur’s idea.

It wasn’t long before he pointed to Athena’s screen and said, “There! Active recess improves memory and concentration, reduces disruptive behavior in class, and improves social development.”

“*Social development?*” said Saffi. “How?”

Wilbur kept reading. “Through negotiation, sharing, and teamwork.”

“You can get creative with this,” Athena said, excited

by the potential impact of Wilbur's presentation. "Give listeners some suggestions for participating in active recess. Think jump ropes, hula hoops, and team sports like basketball and kickball. Students can even walk or run around the soccer field, you know?"

"This is great, Athena." Wilbur was scribbling notes as quickly as he could. "Thanks for your help."

"Yeah, thanks, Athena," said Saffi. It was hard to tell whether she really felt better about her project, but she smiled like it was true.

"You're welcome. Let me know if you could use any other resources. These are great project ideas—I'm sure Coach Manisha will appreciate them."

Athena packed up her laptop and walked to the pool, feeling like she could move mountains. Life was so different when she was getting enough rest. It didn't matter that Saffi's attitude was confusing or that her project outline might not change. Those weren't issues that Athena could control, and with a clear mind, she recognized that.

She wished she'd been training this way all along.



CHAPTER 7: INCLUSIVE APPROACH

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Athena’s final tutoring session was with a boy named Kendry, who, according to his sparse outline, wanted to create a presentation about an inclusive approach to physical education. It was a great idea—assuming he could execute on it. His limited research made it challenging to predict the impact his work could have on schools.

“Maybe we can start with some background information,” Athena suggested. “Why is this topic important to you, Kendry? You’re able-bodied and one of the best basketball players in our class. Inclusivity is always important, but what makes it significant to *you*, specifically?”

Kendry took a deep breath, like he wasn’t sure he wanted to share this information. Athena was about to let him off the hook when he said, “My sister has cerebral palsy. To be able to participate in PE class, the curriculum has to be adapted to fit her needs. It means a lot to her, and it means a lot to me.” He met Athena’s eyes. “I know I need to talk about this with facts, not feelings.”

With a soft smile, Athena said, “Not necessarily. I think your presentation can be both factual and

empathetic, don't you?"

He shrugged. "You're the tutor."

Athena opened her laptop and pulled up the UNICEF website. "The good news is that there are policies in place to ensure an inclusive approach to PE in schools—and beyond."

"Yeah, but not everyone knows about them," said Kendry.

She raised an eyebrow. "You know about these policies already?"

Kendry nodded.

"Then why aren't they in your outline?" Athena half-laughed, half-scoffed. "You don't even need my help, do you?"

"But I do," Kendry argued. "I don't have the same... reverence... for health policies that you do. They haven't always helped my sister, so when I started reading more about them, I couldn't decide which ones to include. They don't feel... I don't know... *real*."

Again, Athena felt her expression soften. "That's understandable. Most people aren't familiar with health policies that don't apply to them, so sometimes, we have to help by educating. I bet your sister will be grateful to you for teaching our classmates about inclusivity in PE."

Hope lit up Kendry's entire face. "You think so?"

"Yes. Why don't we find the policies that would help your sister if everyone knew about them? If we put our minds together, we can make this presentation so strong

that you can present in front of the entire school.”

“That would be great, Athena. Thanks.”

Athena and Kendry spent the rest of the afternoon researching. All children, they read, have the right to participate fully in school activities. Teaching strategies, equipment, environmental factors, and assessments should all be adapted to meet the needs of every student.

“It’s always been hard for my sister to participate in before and after school programs,” Kendry pointed out, “but according to UNICEF, that shouldn’t be the case. Physical education programs should be approachable and flexible for disabled students.”

“Exactly,” said Athena. “Health policies *require* schools to give children and adolescents equal opportunities to participate in physical activity. We *all* need to move—not just some of us.”

Kendry sighed. “I really hope I can pull this off. The whole school should hear this stuff.”

“I agree.” Athena’s heart leapt. This was her favorite tutoring session yet. “Text me if you could use more help, okay? Here’s my number.” She scribbled it on a purple sticky note and passed it to him.

“You’re the best.” Kendry checked the time and stood. “I have to head home, but I’ll keep you posted.”

Athena hoped he would.



CHAPTER 8: HOW TO IMPROVE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY LEVELS

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It was almost the end of the semester, and presentation day was inching closer. For their final unit of PE, the class was playing softball—but Athena was taking it easy. She gave every game her best effort but not at the expense of her rest. Her swim times had been steadily improving over the last few weeks, and she wanted that trend to continue.

On the morning of her PE presentation, she woke up refreshed and energized. She reviewed her slides one more time, smiling as she read the quote she'd found from Lionel Messi. Presented in bold blue lettering, it read:

“In football as in watchmaking, talent and elegance mean nothing without rigour and precision.” – Lionel Messi

Her classmates were going to love it.

Athena thought about Hui, Talib, Saffi, Wilbur, and Kendry and wondered how they were feeling this morning. Were they nervous? Did they feel prepared? Athena assumed that Hui felt a bit anxious, but she would feel better with her friends by her side.

The final draft of Kendry's presentation on inclusivity

was fantastic; he'd emailed it to Athena a few days earlier. If he didn't deserve to present in front of the whole school, no one did. Athena just hoped his speech would do his research justice.

Pulling on her lucky blue dress, Athena adjusted her ponytail, threw the last of her homework into her backpack, and hurried outside to wait for the bus. She smiled when she saw Hui, already standing on the curb. Despite the spring flowers creeping up near her ankles, she was wearing an oversized sweatshirt and jeans. Hui was *always* cold.

"Ready?" Athena asked, giving her friend a hug.

She felt Hui shrug. "Thanks to you. I now know more about active travel than the internet." She laughed.

Once she was at school, Athena's morning passed in a blur, the spring sunshine dampening into a rainy afternoon. She and Hui made their way to the gymnasium together, chatting about their other classes until Saffi ran up beside them.

"How are you feeling about your research?" Hui asked her.

"Pretty good," Saffi replied, hugging her laptop to her chest. "I included a lot of the active classroom things we talked about, Athena. Thanks again for your help."

Athena smiled, wondering which "things" Saffi had found it necessary to include in her presentation. But all she said was, "Of course. Best of luck today."

"You too," said Saffi. She held open the door to the

gym so the other girls could pass through.

When the bell rang, Coach Manisha clapped her hands and said, “Okay, class. Would anyone like to volunteer to present first?”

Athena’s hand shot into the air at lightning speed. The coach laughed. “Take it away, Thea.”

And *take it away* she did. Athena’s presentation on quality PE was a huge success—especially the quote from Lionel Messi. Coach Manisha was so impressed by her effort that she didn’t wait to give her a final grade. She simply said, “Plan to present at next week’s assembly in front of the whole school,” leaving Athena beaming.

Saffi volunteered to go next. Her presentation still lacked detail, but Athena was certain she would pass PE, and that was enough. She gave Saffi a wink as she resumed her seat, and Saffi smiled back.

The students were slower to volunteer after that. Coach Manisha wound up calling on Talib to present next. He looked nervous, but his presentation on before and after school programs was so compelling that the coach gave him a standing ovation. “Excellent work, Talib,” she said. “Plan to present next week please. Your efforts will help our school improve its physical activity levels.”

Talib’s shoulders hunched forward. He did *not* look pleased by this invitation. Nevertheless, he took his seat as another of their classmates stood up to present.

When Hui's name was called, she took a deep breath and plunged into her safety training session, reading directly from the notecards in her hand. Public speaking was not a strength of hers, but her research on active travel was excellent, and when she sat down, Athena whispered in her ear, "I'm so proud of you."

Hui smiled with flushed cheeks. "Thanks, Thea. I'm just glad it's over."

Squeezing her friend's shoulder, Athena watched as Wilbur set up his presentation. He, too, looked nervous, but that made sense—he had become quite passionate about middle schoolers having active recess time. He made his points clearly and concisely, but Athena could see in the slight tremor of his hands how badly he wanted to speak at the assembly. She smiled at him, silently cheering him on.

Much to Wilbur's relief, his laptop was barely closed before Coach Manisha said, "You went above and beyond, Wil. I think this presentation has the potential to impact schools all over the country. If I invite a few legislators to our assembly, would you be one of our presenters?"

Wilbur's eyes widened as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Really? You think *government leaders* will want to hear about active recess?"

Coach Manisha nodded. "I do."

He shrugged modestly. "Sure, Coach. I'll be there." He smiled, then said, "I think Kendry is the only presenter

left.”

It was true. Kendry had been quiet throughout class, and as he connected his laptop to the projector, Athena wondered if his views on health policy had changed since their session. Did he believe in the power of an inclusive approach to help his sister participate in PE?

“This presentation is for my sister,” he began, “but I couldn’t have done it without Athena.”

She smiled. This was going to be good.

“I didn’t believe in the power of health policy until I realized that sometimes, it’s up to us to educate people on the policies that matter to us. An inclusive approach to PE matters to me, so that’s what I’ll be telling you about today.”

Calmly, Kendry covered everything he learned during his tutoring session with Athena, including a few personal anecdotes about how an inclusive approach could benefit his little sister.

When he was finished presenting his research, Kendry turned to Coach Manisha and asked with uncharacteristic boldness, “Do you think legislators would take this information seriously?”

The coach smiled. “Yes, I do. Would you like to present to them?”

Kendry nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. I’ll see you all at next week’s assembly. Athena, Talib, Wilbur, and Kendry, please email me the final drafts of your slideshows so I can have them ready

for you to present.”

As Athena made her way to the school auditorium the following week, she thought about the beginning of the semester and laughed. To think that she'd been *dreading* PE class! Now, it was difficult to imagine a week *without* Coach Manisha. Her yoga sequences had improved Athena's swimming performance so much that she was continuing to practice them every day.

With adequate rest and recovery time, everything was different—including the way Athena thought about health policy.

It's not just about policies, she thought to herself. It's about specific activities, the environment for those activities, and creating opportunities for everyone to participate.

And if not for tutoring her classmates, Athena might never have seen such clear examples of these lessons. She helped her friends with their presentations, yes, but more importantly, she learned from them. Plus, she got to watch Hui fall in love with basketball. Maybe when they moved into high school in a few months, she could convince her to try out for the team.

Either way, Athena couldn't wait to see where her education would take her next.

“You ready, Thea?” Coach Manisha asked her as she

joined Wilbur, Kendry, and Talib backstage.

She nodded. "Let's talk to some legislators."

You can practice health policy just like Athena. Stay active at school and at home, and limit recreational screen time. Remember, movement is medicine!

Writing this series of storybooks is a dream come true and is more rewarding than I ever could have imagined. I want kids of all ages to know that working in health policy is as viable as becoming a doctor, an architect, a teacher, or a farmer.

Thank you so much to my teammates for helping me conceptualize and write each book; to our amazing editor, Aquinnah Bree; and to our talented illustrators, Melina Sugliano and Rodrigo Palacios. In creating this series, we have also created a lifelong bond.

*- Ana Rita Gonzalez, President & CEO,
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