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# Making a Case for Having a Physical Education Specialist

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# Making a Case for Having a ***Physical Education Specialist***

By Amanda Kaldor  
and Joe Deutsch

“A strong K–12 physical education program is usually backed up by a strong leader” (Franck, 2007, p. 7). Strong and persistent leadership is especially important in today’s reality of undervalued physical education. Despite the obesity epidemic and the many health problems facing youth, physical education is viewed as a low-status subject in schools. The governmental legislation known as the No Child Left Behind Act places so much emphasis on academics that physical education often gets overlooked because it is not identified as a core subject (James, 2011). As a result of physical education’s lack of importance in schools, physical educators face a number of challenges. One way to help physical educators with these challenges is to provide them with a physical education specialist (PES).

## The Role of a Physical Education Specialist

A PES is a person who is highly trained and certified in the content of K–12 physical education and is responsible for directing quality physical education programs (Franck, 2007). The role of a PES may vary depending on the needs of the teachers and the district. Typical responsibilities of a PES may include planning professional development opportunities, supporting teachers, giving feedback, initiating new ideas, and advocating for quality physical education programs. For larger districts, the PES may take on more of a consultant role, as the amount of time devoted to the job may not allow for additional teaching responsibilities. In smaller districts, the PES may act more like a director of physical activity and may be a highly qualified physical education teacher who takes on some of the extra responsibilities.

### *Teacher support and feedback*

Marginalization from the outside world has created the perception that physical educators are not “real teachers.” Dealing with the pressures of marginalization often leads to washout, a low sense of teaching efficacy, or burnout of quality teachers (Henninger & Carlson, 2011). A PES can help teachers to become and stay highly qualified by assisting them with program planning, lesson plans, and curriculum design. Although larger districts may have many physical educators, there is often only one teacher at each building. Without support from colleagues, one’s lesson plans can become monotonous. A PES can offer support to these teachers by providing feedback on lesson plans, assessments, or even teaching style. The PES can also help prevent burnout in teachers by providing them with professional development and new ideas to integrate into their curriculum and can even act as a sounding board for teachers facing problems.

### *Plan professional development*

One practice that has been shown to improve student performance is the continued professional development of teachers. To



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be effective, professional development should be content-specific and ongoing (Armour & Yelling, 2007). This is where a PES can really improve professional development for physical educators. When school districts provide professional development for their teachers, it often focuses on literacy or math goals. While both of these topics are important to classroom teachers, little often applies to the physical educator. Opportunities outside the district are also limited given the budgetary restrictions of most districts. A PES can facilitate professional development geared toward physical educators that would help them to become more qualified teachers and stay current in their field. Content-specific professional development also gives educators a chance to share resources with one another and collaborate with other teachers in the same content area.

### *Initiate new ideas and concepts*

Physical education is an ever-changing discipline. In an effort to gain legitimacy, there have been many changes to the focus of curriculum, instruction, and accountability (James, 2011). Without attending conferences or trainings, it can be difficult to stay on top of all these changes. Having a PES gives districts a



budget-friendly way to keep all physical educators up-to-date on current developments in the field. For example, the PES can attend the conferences and trainings and then report back to the teachers in their districts about the important points and topics discussed. The district saves money because they only have to send one person, and it still allows the physical educators to continue growing in their profession. Once these new ideas and concepts have been implemented, the PES should communicate all of the changes that are occurring in physical education with other professionals, administration, and media.

### ***Advocate for physical education***

Advocating for quality physical education programs is vital to maintaining quality programs. Physical educators need to be proactive, creative, and responsible for establishing and maintaining regular communication with parents, administrators, and community members (Sheehy, 2011). It is not the sole job of the PES to advocate for all physical education programs, but the specialist could provide leadership within the district. The leadership of a PES could include developing a web site, planning community events to highlight physical education programs, working with community leaders, or writing newsletters for the district.

### **Suggested Steps to Hiring a PES**

Although there are clear benefits to having a PES, convincing the administration that one is necessary can be a challenge. However, there are steps that can be taken to help the process gain momentum and that will ultimately lead to the hiring of a PES.

Having a PES will benefit all physical educators in the district, so the first step is to gain everyone's support. One might start by conducting a meeting and leading discussions on what support is needed for teachers. A survey can be used to gauge everyone's position on certain topics. Fellow educators provide the best information and insight as to why a PES is needed. Ask questions such as: What effect will hiring a PES have across the district? What areas of the physical education program are lacking? What are the strengths of the physical education program? A survey asking similar questions was given to a group of 17 elementary physical educators in a Midwestern city. The results revealed that teachers believed that a PES would provide a sense of commonality between all the schools in the district. Physical education teachers would be able to continue with the use of common assessments and retain a strong common voice among all elementary physical educators. Teachers believed their stress levels would decrease because there would be a leader to whom they could direct questions and ask for help when needed. They also believed professional development would improve and that this would make it easier to attain district standards and benchmarks. Teachers pointed out how all of these benefits would not only impact teachers, but also improve student learning in physical education.

A list of possible responsibilities of a PES could also be included in the survey, and teachers could rank them in order of importance. The same group of 17 elementary physical educators mentioned earlier ranked seven possible responsibilities of

a PES, including planning school improvement hours, assisting with FITNESSGRAM® and Trifit data, planning professional development, advocating for physical education, planning PLC topics, providing physical education teacher support, and serving on committees and leadership teams. Of the seven possible responsibilities, assisting with Fitnessgram and Trifit data and physical education teacher support accounted for 62% of the top rankings. The category of physical education teacher support included helping with problem solving, ordering assessments, reviewing curriculum, and fielding questions from teachers and administrators. Planning professional development days and advocating for physical education made up the other 38% of the top rankings. Surveys provide valuable information and give direction for subsequent steps that need to be taken. In addition, the survey will also lend more credibility to the advocacy for a PES because the information is coming from all physical educators, as opposed to just one.

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Once baseline data are collected and the needs of all physical educators are understood, step 2 is to research other disciplines. Consider asking the following questions: Do other disciplines have curriculum specialists? Talk to other people in your school building, administration, and secretaries. How long have they been in the position? How did the position begin? Is it a full-time or part-time position? How is the position funded? What has the specialist done for the discipline? Find out which disciplines, if any, have a curriculum specialist. Chances are that with the emphasis placed on math and literacy, at least those two areas will have one. Start by talking with any current specialist. Ask questions and find out as much information as possible from people who are currently in those positions.

The next step is to seek out grants as a possible way to fund the position. Lack of money is often the biggest reason for rejecting

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specialist positions, especially today with every district looking for ways to cut costs. Going to the administration and simply asking them to fund the position may get a quick and emphatic no. So continue to research. Look at different community organizations. There are many organizations within communities that support a common goal of healthy, physically active children. Would they be willing to partner together or make donations to support a PES? Are there grants available that could cover the salary of a PES? Check with the district office. Is there a grant writer on staff? If so, that person would be a great resource when looking for and writing grants. Even if no grant is secured, providing ideas to the administration may increase the likelihood of working together to fund a PES.

The final step is to meet with the administrators and convince them of the benefits of having a PES. It is important to prepare thoroughly for this meeting. Start by preparing an agenda. What points will be covered in the meeting? Go back to the needs of the physical educators in the district and compile a possible list of responsibilities for the PES. Be prepared to explain each one and rank them in order of importance. Review the research conducted in other disciplines. Be careful not to compare physical education to other subjects, as each subject is very different in its needs. Do not make it about fairness (e.g., music has a specialist, so why does physical education not have one?); rather, focus on what a PES could do for the community, the district, the physical education program, and most importantly, the students. Make sure all information is organized and easy to understand. A PowerPoint or handout may be appropriate to highlight the main points of the meeting. Most importantly, be confident and professional. Show the administration how much a PES could benefit the district. After the meeting, make sure to follow up with the administration. It may be a good idea to ask fellow physical educators to show support for the position by emailing administrators or attending a subsequent meeting.

## Conclusion

It is time to really focus on physical education. All teachers need to be held accountable for quality programs that produce highly motivated, healthy, active students. A PES can help districts to produce those quality programs and give physical educators the resources needed to become highly qualified. Remember these important steps when advocating for the hiring of a PES:

1. Get all physical educators to support the idea of a PES.
2. Research other disciplines.
3. Look for possible ways to fund the position.
4. Meet with the administration.

Be prepared to compromise. Although having a full-time, fully funded PES would be ideal, are there concessions that could be made? Would it be a possibility to have a part-time PES? If so, what responsibilities are most important to include in the job description? Could the PES position be split between two teachers? Splitting the position and assigning two teachers as part-time physical educators and part-time PESs eliminates the district having to pay benefits to another employee. Be creative and look for ways to work with administrators. After all, something is better than nothing.

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To learn more about this topic, refer to these American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance resources at <http://www.aahperd.org/shop>: *Moving into the Future: National Standards for Physical Education* and *National Standards & Guidelines for Physical Education Teacher Education*.