



Physical Education, Politics, and SPEAK Out! Day

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PHYSICAL EDUCATION, POLITICS, AND *SPEAK Out!* DAY

The business of politics can have a profound influence
on how physical education is viewed in our schools.

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WHEN I BRING UP POLITICS in my Introduction to Health and Physical Education class, most of my students indicate that they are not politically active, don't follow politics very closely, and basically just think that politics is boring. They have trouble recognizing that politics has any direct effect on them as students, or that politics will affect them some day as health and physical education teachers.

My students may not be all that different from many practicing health and physical education (HPE) professionals. Stretched between teaching, coaching, families, and setting a good example of a physically active lifestyle (we are exercising, right?), many HPE professionals just don't have time to be politically active, either at their schools or in their communities, much less at the state or national level. However,

choosing to be politically uninvolved comes with a price. To those who just don't care about things political, Camacho and Fernandez-Balboa (2006) have this to say:

We tend to rationalise our political apathy thus: "I've got enough sorting out to do in my own life to want to be sorting out other people's." To be sure, taking this position may seem reasonable at times; yet, it has dire consequences for us in particular and society in general, for it leaves public affairs in the hands of small groups of people who seldom fight for the common good. (p. 10–11)

This article explains why politics is important and what you can do to get politically involved in your school, community and nation. It will also describe the first-hand political experience of a group of students when they participated in NASPE's *SPEAK Out!* Day.

Politics is more than just presidential elections. Daryl Siedentop (2009) defines politics thusly, "When you try to decide what the common good is for... the department you administer...or the students you

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teach, you are in the field of philosophy called politics.” (p. 58). Because politics involves decisions that are made for the perceived benefit of society as a whole, it is to our distinct advantage to be politically aware. As we strive to provide the very best health and physical education experiences for our students, we must realize that we cannot do it alone. School boards, superintendents, and principals at the public school level, and presidents, provosts and deans at the university level all play roles in determining how well we can do our jobs. The administrators with whom we work must be led to understand that we are helping them meet their goals and that we are an asset to the overall educational process. In an ideal world, those decision-makers would just naturally appreciate health and physical educators for the good we do. But to sit back and hope they recognize the important contribution we are making to the overall goals of the school/university would be politically unwise. Therefore, I submit three strategies for putting health and physical education in the best political position. Those strategies are managing political perception, controlling conflicting interests, and engaging in political advocacy.

Political Perception

Let's start with the perception that many administrators and parents have toward physical education. While some recognize the valuable contribution we make to the total development of our students, others do not realize the significance of what goes on in health and physical education classes. This is not a new phenomenon. Dudley Sargent, one of the early founders of our discipline, writes of “the public prejudice which I was later to know well and battle hard” (Sargent, 1927, p. 62) as he strove to gain support for physical education in the late 1800's. Through hard work, political savvy, and ultimately through the success of his program, he earned recognition for physical education and established the first physical education program at Harvard.

What is the perception of your program by the administrators and parents at your school? Do they perceive your program as one that helps children develop healthy bodies and minds or do they perceive PE as merely providing recess? We each have a responsibility to our profession and to our students to make sure that we are conducting the types of programs that will lead to positive outcomes and positive perceptions. Have we communicated the importance of physical activity in brain development and the importance placed on the role of physical education programs in the fight against our national obesity epidemic, or do our administrators think that we are merely babysitting students for a few minutes each day? Do your administrators and parents know what your goals are for your class? We know that we are doing important things in our health and physical education classes. Let's make sure our administrators and other stake holders share that perception. Perception is an important first step in the political process.

Controlling Conflicting Interests

If positive perception is the first step in political success, the second step involves controlling conflicting interests. Despite the evidence of the need for strong physical education programs—to combat the growing obesity epidemic, to help with our students' cognitive development, and to help our students develop skills, knowledge and attitudes to equip them for a lifetime of physical activity—not

everyone at our schools is going to support what we are doing in physical education. Classroom teachers working to have their students pass end of grade tests and teachers of special subjects such as art and music want our students to spend more time with them, even if it means less time in physical education. At the university level, some faculty may perceive physical education as merely another program competing for diminishing dollars in the overall budget. Health and physical education classes in the general education program may be perceived as hours that could be better spent by their majors taking classes in their programs.

Oliver (1992) contends that political pressures occur when people have conflicting interests. She goes on to say that deinstitutionalization can happen when the larger organization sees that such a move protects its own interests. Deinstitutionalization has happened at universities across the nation where some physical education programs have been eliminated. While it is unlikely that physical education programs will be abolished in public schools in the near future, we have already seen programs reduced. Many high schools now require only one semester of health and physical education for graduation. Several universities have done away with their physical education majors. Not only our administrators but also our fellow teachers need to recognize that high quality physical education programs contribute to the overall success of our students.

Research has demonstrated that participation in physical activity has been associated with improved cognitive performance (Ruiz et al., 2010) and academic achievement (Grissom, 2005). John Ratey, an associate professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School, has written an entire book about the positive effect of physical activity on brain development. He argues strongly for high quality physical education programs in schools (Ratey & Hagerman, 2008). If we are going to leave no stone unturned in an effort to help the overall development of our students, including improving end of grade test scores, we need to be sure that our fellow teachers and our administrators know that high quality physical education classes contribute toward that goal. The more that we can demonstrate that our programs support the goals of the other programs at our schools, and the more we can show that our programs are having

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a positive impact on the “whole” student, the more support we will receive from our constituents. University faculty and administrators also need to be reminded of the positive impact that our physical education graduates will have on the lives of their future students.

Political Advocacy

A third step in the political process is engaging in advocacy for our profession. We need to seek external support for our programs at our schools and universities. If we do not ask for increased physical activity time, for adequate faculty, staff, and financial support,



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and for manageable class sizes, no one is going to plead our case for us. Seeking support for our programs starts at home but must go beyond our campus walls. We must be advocates for health and physical education at the state and national levels, as well. It is crucial that we know who represents us in the legislatures in our states and in Washington. We need to stay current on issues that affect our schools and our profession. We need to promote our profession.

The Carol M. White Physical Education Program (PEP) is an example of a hugely successful program that came about through political advocacy. PEP is a federally funded program that has provided invaluable support for physical education. Since their conception, PEP grants have provided an average of over \$50 million per year for K-12 physical education programs. However, PEP funding has been targeted for elimination by some in Congress. In 2012, PEP grant funds were at risk for being consolidated into the Safe,

Successful and Healthy Students Initiative, which would mean that physical education programs would have to compete with non-academic areas for funding (Carol M. White PEP grant competition, 2011). Similarly, support is needed to have physical education recognized as a core academic subject so that it is eligible for funds through the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act. These referendums need our support.

Six Specific Suggestions

Becoming politically active may seem overwhelming. If you were able to come up with a specific goal from reading the previous, that's great. Go for it. If you need some help to get started, here are six specific suggestions. You don't have to do them all at once. Pick one or two.

1. Buy the book *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*, by John Ratey and Eric Hagerman. Read it yourself first, and then give it to your principal. Do not give it to your principal without having read it first. You may not know what you're getting into.

2. Collect fitness data from your students. Compare your students' scores with those of your nearby schools or with your state norms. Share those results with your principal. If your scores are above the state average or higher than your neighbors, inform your principal that you're doing a good job and you want more resources to continue the effort. If your scores are below the other averages, you need support to catch up. When your principal asks what you need, be ready with your answer. Do you need additional equipment? An additional certified physical education teacher? A teacher's assistant? The answer to the question of what you need starts with your vision of what your perfect program would be and what it would take to get there. Then you ask for the one thing that will help you come closest to reaching your goal. When that happens and you document your program's improvement, ask for the second thing on your list.

3. Find a good story and publicize it. What successes have resulted from your physical education program? Do you have a student who had never participated in sports or physical activity outside of physical education before but who learned a skill in your class that translated into an active lifestyle? Maybe she started running 5Ks or maybe he made the school soccer team. Do you have a student who changed his physical activity and eating habits and moved into a higher healthy fitness zone as a result of your class? Stories like these, published in the PTA newsletter or stapled to the bulletin board in your gym, can have a huge impact on the perception of your program.

4. Take a picture of your class learning a dance from another culture or from another era. Send the picture to the Spanish or the history teacher to post on her classroom wall. If she didn't know that your physical education class was contributing to the goals of her class before you sent the picture, she'll know it after she gets the photo.

5. Compare the fitness scores of your students to their End of Grade test results. Research has shown a positive correlation between fitness scores and classroom grades. If your students show a continuation of that pattern it provides strong evidence of the value of your program. Send a letter with those results to your principal and the school board.

6. Log in occasionally to AAHPERD's Legislative Action Center (<http://www.aahperd.org/whatwedo/advocacy>) to stay informed about what's going on at the national level. Physical education needs the help of our dedicated professionals. If you need data from the Shape of the Nation Report to share with the PTA or if you

want to write a letter to your congressional representatives or a letter to the editor of your local newspaper to advocate for PEP funding or in support of the FIT Kids Act, or if you want just about any other information about what's going on politically, the Legislative Action Center is a wonderful source of information.

Politics in Action

In the spring of 2012, five students and a Health and Physical Education professor from Western Carolina University became politically active. We attended SPEAK Out! Day in Washington, D.C.

SPEAK Out! Day is a day of political advocacy sponsored by NASPE. Physical educators from across the country are invited each year to come to Washington, D.C., to meet their senators and representatives and to advocate for physical education. This experience provided an opportunity for these undergraduate health and physical education majors to experience the legislative process first hand.

“Physical education classes have changed for the better over the years and it is important that everyone realize that we are not simply rolling out the ball every day and supervising recess.”

They were able to meet legislators and their aides, to observe the House of Representatives in session, and to advocate for health and physical education on a national level. In March 2012, we went to Washington to learn how to state our case for physical education and to meet with those on the national level who could support physical education in our schools.

Beginning with a NASPE-sponsored webinar several weeks before our trip to Washington, we learned how to plan for a face to face meeting with our legislators. In a two-hour workshop in Herndon, VA, on the night before SPEAK Out! Day we were able to meet with NASPE leaders and other HPE professionals from across the nation who were in Washington for SPEAK Out! Day. And finally, we had the opportunity to meet with legislators on Capitol Hill and talk to them directly about the importance of health and physical education and to advocate for their support.

Here are some of their stories.

From Kimberly Williams:

It appears that many of our legislators hadn't been in schools recently enough to realize what is going on in physical education today. Many thought that all students were getting physical education every day, while others didn't understand why daily physical activity in the schools is vital. In our classes we learn about the importance of helping students develop a physically active lifestyle, but it was obvious that many of the legislators and their staffs were thinking back to their physical education classes, which might have had different objectives. Physical education classes have changed for

the better over the years and it is important that everyone realize that we are not simply rolling out the ball every day and supervising recess.

Because of the pressure of “No Child Left Behind” it is becoming more common to limit the school's focus to the “core” subjects and reduce time for the critical subject of physical education. I feel that this was a critical opportunity for the legislators that we spoke with to better understand the importance of what goes on in high quality physical education classes. I also feel like this was a great opportunity for me as a student because I was able to meet important people in our field and have an impact on my profession. This is definitely something that I would like to do again as a professional.

From Lauren Skidmore:

Through SPEAK Out! Day I was able to be a part of a movement that I will never forget. As we drove from the mountains toward Washington we were both nervous and excited as we rehearsed what to say, because for all of us it was the first time we were going to meet our congressmen and to be a part of a national event. At the workshop that next night I was amazed at how many physical education teachers were there from all over the United States. Seeing this many people committed to voicing their concern for this one cause was very inspirational. At that moment I knew that I had chosen the right profession for my life.

The next morning we met Heath Shuler, our district representative for western North Carolina. Once our meeting began all the notes I had looked over and all I had memorized left me, because at that moment I didn't need it. I knew what I was there to discuss, because it was exactly what I had been learning for the last four years. During our discussion of the importance of physical education in the schools, Mr. Shuler seemed taken aback by how serious we were about our cause. He was all for keeping physical education a part of the curriculum and recognizing it as a core subject. Mr. Shuler shook our hands and let us know how proud he was to see students be such strong advocates for physical education. At the end of our meeting I was ready to seize the day.

As we left Washington that night for the long drive home, I think we all held our heads a little bit higher, because we truly felt that we were





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making a difference to increase support for physical education not only in our state, but also throughout our country. I will continue to be an advocate for physical education and teach my students the importance of being physically active for their lifetimes.

From Rachael Kopp:

As we planned our trip to Washington, we decided to focus on ESEA and the PEP Grant with the men and women on Capitol Hill. Many of the legislators with whom we talked were only slightly aware of the existence of the issues or were unaware of just how important they were to the future of physical education.

My fellow classmate and I made clear to them exactly how ESEA could improve physical education in public schools by making physical education a core subject, mandating adequate amounts of educational physical activity and accountability for meeting state and national standards in every school. Making physical education a core subject in public schools would not only secure a period of time for it in the daily lives of students, but would also give physical education a new face to both students and faculty as an important part of the educational experience. We shared with our legislators the research on the impact of adequate amounts of daily physical education (not just activity time) on improved student academic performance and behavior in traditional classroom settings.

Our second objective in meeting with the legislators was to bring to light the proposed changes to the PEP Grant program. Currently, the PEP grant is the only government funded program for physical education that allows physical education programs to receive federal funding for local school districts. This money is used to advance and develop better physical education programs. Most of the men and women that we spoke to on Capitol Hill were unaware of the proposed changes to the PEP grant and that the changes would allow all subject areas to compete for the grant money that was originally only available to physical education. With such little money allocated to better our physical education programs and facilities at the state level, it would be incredibly detrimental to have PEP grant funding taken away.

Physical education professionals from across the country sacrificed their time and money to rally together on Capitol Hill to stand up for our professional field and to stand up for quality physical education for the children in our country. We went to support necessary changes to education that would increase the emphasis of the importance of physical education nationwide and enhance students' educational experiences.

Experiencing the political process first hand was an important step in the professional development of these students. More students and practicing professionals need to become politically active. Despite the efforts of SPEAK Out! Day and the efforts of our

advocates in AAHPERD and NASPE, neither health education nor physical education were included in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in the spring of 2012 ("ESEA Advances", 2012). However it is still not too late for each of us to contact our legislators to ask for their support. If you want to find out how you can make a difference at the national level, the AAHPERD legislative Action Center (www.aahperd.org/whatwedo/advocacy) is a good place to start.

Political activism was probably not a major topic in your physical education teacher preparation program. But it is important. While sending a note periodically to your principal and superintendent highlighting the success of your program may not be a part of your job description, it can be an effective way to advocate for physical education. And while it is not a job requirement to communicate with the classroom teachers about how physical education is contributing to overall student success, doing so may help generate additional internal support for your program. It might seem like going the extra mile to send an email to your state or national representatives or senators to ask their support for health and physical education. And hiring a substitute teacher so that you can take two days off to attend SPEAK Out! Day might seem impossible. But the reality is that without support from our school administrators, our colleagues at our schools, and our state and national political leaders, we will not be able to provide the high quality health and physical education programs that our students need.

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