## The power of grassroots advocacy: Increasing physical activity levels in elementary schools across Montana

with the idea of teaching these

classroom teachers how to incorporate

movement into their content classes

in a way that would meet both state

physical education and content

How can I meet the national recommendations for daily physical activity in my school? How can I gain the backing of my principal and colleagues? These are two major questions that many physical educators around the country ask themselves. Budget constraints, the increased focus on standardized test scores, and the general lack of support for physical education represent significant and seemingly insurmountable barriers to change. SHAPE America member Reg Hageman, who is a PE teacher at Capital High

advocacy at the grassroots level.

on education."

School in Helena, MT and a board member and

current president-elect of SHAPE Montana (MT), is

finding a way to overcome these challenges through

As a fairly new member on the SHAPE MT

Board of Directors, he was the only person to show

interest in forming a political action and advocacy

committee. "Advocacy became my niche," says Reg.

"I began attending SPEAK Out! Day and organized

support, since it is responsible for making decisions

One issue that Reg identified as needing special

'Lobby Days' during which we reach out to the

Montana Board of Public Education (BPE) for

attention with regard to advocacy in his state

was the lack of physical education requirements

for elementary schools. Most elementary school children only receive 30 minutes twice a week

of physical education — which is far from the

recommended 150 minutes per week. "In Montana,

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"We know that if we can get

kids to move more, they will

learn better," says Reg, and the

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elementary physical education. So, we came up



Reg Hageman

standards," Reg says. "Doing this would not only increase the students' weekly physical activity minutes, it would also help to overstep problems such as the lack of funding, lack of appropriate facilities, and difficulty teaching physical education outside during the winter months." Reg relates, "I had little to no experience in advocacy, so I thought it would be as

simple as getting letters of support from hospitals, parents, principals and other constituents and presenting them to the BPE. When I had a chance meeting with the executive director of the BPE, he told me that the only way to make such a shift happen would be to start at the grassroots level something I knew nothing about. During a meeting with other members of the SHAPE MT Board, someone suggested starting a pilot program at a few schools. Such a pilot program would require (1) certified staff (and elementary teachers already are certified), (2) standards-based instruction, and (3) class size limits in order to ensure quality instruction."

The next step was to present the idea to the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) and the director of the Health and Safety Division. "They loved the idea, and offered us \$6,000 to give the pilot schools a stipend for participating in the program!" says Reg. To start, three pilot schools were selected; the classroom teachers from two schools were invited to the SHAPE MT summer conference for training, while teachers at the third school were trained onsite. The SHAPE America book, *Health and Physical Education for Elementary Classroom Teachers*, serves as the manual for the trainings.

"Per the expectations of the OPI, schools are required to present three types of deliverables: attendance, student behavior and test score data," Reg explains. "We conduct site visits periodically to observe lessons and check in with the classroom teachers on what is working well, what challenges they are facing, and how they are documenting their progress. Some of the teachers get really creative with ways to incorporate movement into their



Spelling aerobics in Ms. Jeckell's class

upcoming national convention cues from Reg and his pilot pr Whatever efforts you make m



Class movement

lessons, while others are hesitant at first because the program involves a shift in the way they teach. We focus on supporting them to succeed."

After a successful first year and a promise from the OPI to provide \$20,000 if 10 pilot schools could be found, Reg got back to work. "It takes a lot of leg work to spread the word," he says. "We promoted the pilot program at our summer conference, at the Teachers' Association Conference, at the state Principals' Conference, at the Montana Behavioral Initiative Conference, and at a mini-conference we organized in eastern Montana. We have 11 pilot schools participating this year from across the state." The funds provided by the OPI cover a \$1,050 stipend for each participating school, as well as costs for trainings and travel. "SHAPE MT Executive Director Nancy Stock recently retired from teaching and has been doing site visits with me and helping with trainings, and I was approved to take a sabbatical from my teaching position so I can focus on this project more fully," Reg adds.

"We know that if we can get kids to move more, they will learn better," says Reg, and the program has already shown signs of success, especially in the area of student behavior. One school that had major behavioral issues among first graders reported that after one year of the pilot program, those same students had virtually no behavioral issues when they started the second grade. A Kindergarten teacher also reported a visible improvement in class climate, saying that she had done away with time-outs because they were no longer necessary. "In this second year of the program, we are eager to see if there are any visible improvements in school attendance and test scores."

Now ask yourself, "How can I start my own grassroots advocacy efforts in my school, community, district or state?" Attend the next SPEAK Out! Day. Connect with teachers who are already advocating for the profession at the upcoming national convention. Or take some cues from Reg and his pilot program in Montana. Whatever efforts you make may very well bring about real change.



18 SHAPE