IN THE PAST FOUR YEARS, I have had to increase my advocacy efforts to meet the demands of changing local, state, and national policies related to health and physical education (HPE). During that time, my focus on advocacy made me realize that nobody really teaches us to be advocates for what we do. I never had a single undergraduate or graduate class that discussed how or why we need to advocate for HPE. Nevertheless, it is essential that we all work together to be spokespeople for our areas at the local, state, and national levels. But what does it look like, and how does it happen? The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of advocacy across these three levels and to provide health and physical educators with some concrete strategies for increasing their advocacy initiatives.
Start Small, at the Local Level

Locally, there are plenty of opportunities to provide positive messages in your school and district regarding the importance of areas and programs. First, get information out to the public, especially the good news. This can be done through blogs, a school website, or a message board in front of the school. Collaborate with your administrator on a press release for any awards or grants the HPE program receives.

Next, be aware of issues that arise with the school boards and policies that could affect HPE. Review school board agendas, often published online before the meeting, for items of discussion that may affect you and your program. Be ready to contact your school board representative with feedback regarding applicable agenda items. On a related note, it is important to take the time to build a relationship with your school board representative. If he or she is in your building, introduce yourself and invite that individual to observe your class. A positive relationship will open lines of communication in regard to feedback on local policies and decisions that require a vote. If you are already making an impact at the local level, pick up the pace and try to get involved at the state level.

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State-Level Advocacy: Know Your State

Decisions regarding a plethora of issues impacting HPE teachers and their classrooms are often made at the state level. Class sizes, curriculum, standards, testing, and teacher salaries and benefits are topics discussed by state boards of education, departments of education, and legislators. Therefore, it is imperative that we are all proactive in monitoring the agendas and meetings of these groups. Without your feedback on pending legislation and policies, decision makers are forced to guess how classrooms and teachers will be affected, and teachers’ voices will be absent from the resulting policies.

Physical educators in Georgia felt the negative effect several years ago when a requirement for middle school physical education was repealed. The limited response from teachers to legislators and decision makers was likely a contributing factor in the change. This past year, Georgia’s physical educators were more responsive to legislation that could have jeopardized FITNESSGRAM® testing in the state. A recent debate over the Common Core led to a bill passed by the Georgia Senate limiting the use of tests designed outside of the state. A common fear among physical educators was that it would lead to the elimination of the Fitnessgram. As the bill prepared to go to the House, many subject area groups, including the Georgia Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (GAHPERD), mobilized their messages via email and social media. Then GAHPERD sent an email blast to all members with a template message about the impact of the bill and links to legislators’ email addresses. Updates were sent throughout a two-week span to notify the GAHPERD membership of progress.

Social media, particularly Twitter, was a vital, timely tool to spread the benefits of Fitnessgram and the ramifications of losing the ability to use it. Alliances were formed with individuals and other groups — such as the Georgia Science Teachers Association — on social media that helped in supporting the same cause. Our efforts paid off as the bill was altered and was eventually defeated in the House, thereby keeping Fitnessgram unchanged. Another positive outcome of our efforts is that the GAHPERD Twitter account is now followed by several key curriculum and legislative stakeholders, including Governor Nathan Deal.

Utilize information published online, such as agendas and meeting minutes, to monitor events at the various levels of state government. Following legislators and key stakeholders on social media can give you timely knowledge regarding potential positive or negative changes. Finally, being an active member in your state AHPERD or SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators association is an avenue to obtain notification about pertinent legislation or decisions.

The Big Stage: National Politics

Advocacy at the national level is more challenging. As with state politics, national politicians can decide on funding, grants, and initiatives that will eventually make their way into your school. While following all the potential legislation that comes out of Capitol Hill can be overwhelming, the SHAPE America staff, led by Senior Manager of Advocacy Carly Braxton, has created two powerful tools that help teachers across the country to track national politics: the SHAPE America website and the annual SPEAK Out! Day event.
First, SHAPE America has a “Media & Advocacy” page on its new website (http://www.shapeamerica.org). This section provides a toolkit and current articles supporting our professions. The “Legislative Action Center” provides a list of key issues currently under consideration at the national level. You can take action on legislation by contacting your national representatives through the website with a few easy clicks of the mouse. Personally, I have used this to contact my Georgia legislators and I always get a reply. This tool makes it simple for HPE teachers to contact top-level decision makers, which makes it feasible to fit this advocacy initiative into our busy schedules.

Next, the annual SPEAK Out! Day organized by SHAPE America provides attendees with the opportunity to meet with their state’s national legislators on Capitol Hill. Although expenses for the trip are sometimes paid for by individuals, scholarship opportunities through state AHPERDs or SHAPE America can help offset the cost. Last year’s event included more than 120 professionals from 36 states who visited their respective legislators to deliver messages on key items impacting our programs.

Advocates are transported to Capitol Hill by SHAPE America staff and spend the entire day meeting with legislators and their designated representatives. The experience can be exhausting, yet it is always rewarding. This year, Georgia advocates had five meetings with scheduled appointment times and visited two additional offices for “drop-ins” or unscheduled meetings. While some advocates met with their legislators, our group met with staff members. Each staff member with whom we met was very receptive, and some even recognized members of our group from the previous year. That is a positive sign that the event is working. SPEAK Out! Day participants are developing a relationship with Congress. Meetings usually only last 5 to 10 minutes, so it is important to have a game plan and talking points ready. Following SPEAK Out! Day, participants provide reports to SHAPE America staff, who then help organize follow-up efforts with key legislators. Next year’s SPEAK Out! Day is scheduled to take place on February 10–11, 2015 (http://www.shapeamerica.org/events/speakoutday).

Without a doubt, strong advocacy by HPE professionals can make an impact at the local, state, and national levels. However, it is up to all of us to spread our message across the country regarding the importance of our disciplines. Monitoring all levels of politics, communicating with legislators, and participating in advocacy events can create positive changes and minimize detrimental actions. The easiest and most powerful advocacy tool is to communicate the “good news” about your program to the public we serve. Negative publicity about poor teaching, unsafe practices, and program cuts will always haunt us. However, if we can infuse stories about quality teachers, successful programs, and physically literate students, our professions will become stronger. In combination with our advocacy efforts at the state and national levels, this will create a powerful advocacy platform that will enhance all of our professional lives and the lives of the students we teach.

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