The next generation of teachers will be tasked with showcasing their advocacy skills to promote the educational value of quality health and physical education (HPE) programs. The new Initial Standards for Teacher Preparation drafted by SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators include advocacy and promotion as key professional behaviors (Krause et al., 2015). Advocacy skills include effective communication with education stakeholders (e.g., administrators, parents and students) and assertive negotiation for the interests and rights of the K–12 students in their care. These skills assist educators in promoting the profession as a key contributor to the youth education experience. This change to the teacher preparation standards will prompt HPE teacher preparation programs to provide opportunities and activities that facilitate advocacy skill development and practice (Hurley, 2016).
Establishing Your Fan Base

As the project coordinator, I begin to establish our “fan base” very early in the school year. Because many school districts begin their academic year earlier than the university calendar, I begin perusing community school websites to find parent-teacher organization (PTO) information. Contact information is sometimes challenging to secure, but school calendars will often highlight meeting dates and times. Additionally, phone calls to the administrative office can yield a name and email for the PTO president or other parents/guardians in leadership positions. Attendance at the first meeting of the year gets me on the agenda where I briefly introduce and describe the advocacy project. I market the presentation as “practice” in sharing with parents, colleagues and administrators the value of our profession and current trends in quality HPE. I also identify a late-semester meeting date for my students to present the information they develop throughout the semester. Groups welcome the opportunity to hear from our students; all PTO groups that have been approached have accepted our request and have formally invited us to present to their parents, teachers and administrators.

Organizing Your Teams

Once the PTOs have been identified and dates established, I begin to place our students into presentation groups, assign them to community schools, and establish a timeline for the project. I typically get teams together within the first month of classes, and because this advocacy activity is completed during their senior year, I am able to organize teams according to student strengths and weaknesses to maximize team effectiveness. Teams complete an accountability contract highlighting each member’s strengths and weaknesses and a team-generated conflict resolution plan. All members sign the contract and accept consequences of contract breaches (e.g., project point deductions, group dismissal). I also try to match the strength of student teams with current physical education programs at the community schools. For example, I might place my strongest team at a school that has recently reduced or dropped the physical education requirement. In one situation, a PTO parent president with concerns that their junior high requirement had been dropped without parental knowledge approached me and invited our students to present the value of our discipline to parents and administrators.

University library professionals equipped with project requirements conduct a workshop where students are guided to multiple knowledge-driven resources, including scientific and scholarly databases. Teams brainstorm a variety of current topics for inclusion in the advocacy presentations and have flexibility in presentation design while adhering to a science-based framework. Teams are required to secure professional sources (e.g., .org. or .gov web resources, scholarly research and practitioner-focused publications) as they craft their advocacy message.

Developing the Game Plan and Honing Key Skills

Teams are required to complete five formal meetings and submit their meeting minutes using an electronic course-management system. Each team assigns presentation sections, such as introduction, content and conclusion, to each member according to presentation strengths and preferences. Teams are provided with opening information that introduces the HPE university program while highlighting their charge to advocate for the value of HPE in K–12 education. I emphasize the importance of tailoring the message so that it clearly resonates with the parents, administrators and teachers in their specific school community. Groups are guided to school websites where they learn about each district’s mission and vision. Students access teachers’ websites to gain knowledge of the assigned school’s climate for academics, student values and administrator presence. I encourage them to showcase the science linking HPE and academic achievement, along with holistic wellness outcomes for physically literate youth, and to gather resources from professional websites, such as the one maintained by SHAPE America (www.shapeamerica.org). I discourage negative health messages (e.g., childhood obesity), as they may be perceived as stigmatizing and blaming (Puhl, Peterson, & Ludicke, 2011).

This message is considered “high stakes,” so student teams complete two required peer-practice sessions. Two weeks from their presentation date, teams receive critical feedback from peers on presentation style and content. Final presentation practices are approximately one week before the PTO meeting dates, and students practice streamlining speaking transitions and clearly conveying the “take-home” message within the 20-minute timeline.

Game Night

Student advocates dress professionally (e.g., collared shirts and dress clothes) and arrive at their community school early
for logistical orientation and setup. University teams bring all presentation materials, including information flyers (see http://www.shapeamerica.org/advocacy/upload/5278-shape_AdvocacyFlyer_Update50ms_WEB.pdf), an LCD projector, portable screen and laptop, as bringing this equipment expedites on-site preparation and eliminates the need for administrative passwords and technical support often unavailable after school hours. Typically, the PTO agenda sets our presentation as first business. We thank the PTO for their hospitality and provide an overview of our advocacy message. As the HPE faculty member, I conclude all presentations with a brief review of education policy and engagement points for the school community (SHAPE America, 2016). This message highlights parents as the most powerful education stakeholders and the administrators’ commitment and contributions as pivotal to the community educational experience and success.

Postgame Press Release

Approximately 40 preservice educators have engaged in advocacy outreach to approximately 12 schools and 100 parents and administrators in Central Indiana. In reflecting on their experiences, students have noted:

- “The project helped build my advocacy skills . . . conveying our message about the importance of a quality [physical education] program.”
- “Once I started my presentation, and saw people actually interested in my data and facts . . . I became comfortable and talked from the heart about my passion for my field.”
- “I felt valued and listened to . . . parents were very engaged — even surprised.”

Outreach to parents to promote HPE as a valued discipline in K–12 students’ well-rounded education excites young professionals’ interest in advocacy. Effective advocacy continues to be paramount for the HPE profession. Preservice HPE teachers should be exposed to a variety of community advocacy opportunities. The project described in this article aids this generation of educators in developing the cheerleading skills necessary for continued promotion of our discipline.

References


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Submissions Welcome!

Readers are encouraged to send “Advocacy in Action” submissions to column editor K. Andrew R. Richards at advocacy@shapeamerica.org.

The purpose of the Strategies column “Advocacy in Action” is to provide tangible, real-world examples of grassroots and national-level advocacy activities taking place in the fields of physical education, health education and physical activity. Submissions should be written in a conversational, practical tone. Columns should be 1,000–1,300 words, or roughly four typed, double-spaced pages.