Physical education is in a precarious position. On the one hand, physical activity receives a significant amount of public attention due to the current obesity epidemic. On the other hand, school-based physical education occurs in a context of high-stakes testing and accountability that favors mathematics and literacy at the expense of cutting (or eliminating) physical education programs. It is as though physical activity initiatives outside of schools (e.g., Let’s Move! Active Schools, NFL Play 60) are perceived as having the potential to make a difference, but in-school physical education programs continue to be viewed with skepticism.
Likely, this is due to the public’s personal experiences as students in physical education classes. These firsthand experiences result in beliefs about the purpose and goals of physical education that are powerful and difficult to change (Lawson, 1989). Put simply, most individuals do not know about the benefits and comprehensive nature of quality physical education programming. In view of this, physical educators desperately need to demonstrate the value and role of their subject in the education process. Enter “advocacy.”

The Public Perception of Traditional Physical Education

Unfortunately, much of the public continues to view physical education as “gym class.” Despite contemporary approaches to physical education that emphasize physical activity and wellness, public perception remains negative, and research indicates that classroom teachers continue to see physical education as simply a break in their own schedule (Curtner-Smith, 1997). One of the factors contributing to this is the dominance of competitive team sports in the curriculum (Bulger & Housner, 2009). Negative stereotypes of physical education conjure up images of “roll-out-the-ball” basketball, competitive situations dominated by highly skilled students, and games that privilege a narrow range of talents and interests. If we are to change the perception of physical education, then we must change this mental picture. To continue to deliver programs composed of basketball, volleyball, baseball/softball, football, and soccer using a roll-out-the-ball style of teaching only perpetuates the existing stereotypes of our subject matter.

There are numerous ways to advocate for physical education as a subject and for physical educators to advocate for themselves as teachers. Physical educators are personally responsible for offering programs that are worthy of advocacy and can legitimately be viewed by the public as valuable. As such, it seems that a first step in this process is to let go of “old-school physical education (PE)” in place of what McCaughtry (2009) calls “cool physical education (PE).”

‘Cool PE’ as a Form of Advocacy

Practitioners and scholars alike have consistently called for a renewed approach to the physical education curriculum to move the field forward and demonstrate that physical education can make a meaningful difference. If we are to change public perceptions of our field, we need to change the nature of physical education programming. McCaughtry (2009) pointed out that many students do not identify with the typical approaches to physical education. These are the same students who are least likely to be involved in sports and physical activity outside of school and who need the most attention from physical educators. According to McCaughtry, “cool PE” is physical education that: a) “moves” students, b) empowers students with choice, and c) is meaningful to students outside of the gym and has cultural relevance. This includes activities such as hip-hop dance, orienteering, yoga, Pilates, martial arts, rock climbing, skateboarding, triathlon, swimming, strength and conditioning, and cycling. You can begin by asking students to submit suggestions of activities they have not done but would like to learn. Provide examples from the “cool” list that you feel interested in or competent in teaching. Following this, identify community resources (facilities, experts, and equipment) that can help you take your lessons outside of the gym.

Reconceptualizing the physical education curriculum, providing “cool PE” programs, and leaving “old-school PE” in the past allows students to develop skills in physical activities they are more likely to engage in on their own and later into adulthood. If our goal is to prepare students to be physically active for a lifetime, this seems to be a critical component in our efforts. Further, “cool PE” presents a very different image of the nature of our content and its significance for students than does “old-school PE.” Because “cool PE” includes content that speaks to all students, skill levels, and interests (not just males or highly skilled movers), it furthers the idea that movement and physical activity are for everyone.

The problem is, however, that many physical educators choose what they know, what they themselves liked, and what they perceive to be enjoyable. In fact, Ferry and McCaughtry (2013) found that physical educators in their study had such strong emotional ties to sports and a sport curriculum that they described it as a love affair. Although this is not inherently wrong, it is not always aligned with the “cool PE” model. The challenge, then, that I present to physical educators who continue to offer a traditional competitive team–sport curriculum is this: Choose one “unit” in your current program and swap it for one of the “cool” alternatives. Choose one you feel comfortable with, or allow your students to select from the list of “cool
PE” activities. Consult with other teachers, physical educators, professionals, students, or parents in your school community if you need assistance. Invite parents and community members to engage in the unit with you and your students. Advertise the unit and your community partnerships for offering this activity to classroom teachers, administrators, and parents. See what “cool PE” can do!

**Conclusion**

To be clear, a traditional team-sport curriculum is not inherently bad. And, yes, some students experience it with significant enjoyment. The reality is this: We have an image problem in physical education. The traditional competitive team-sport curriculum (“old-school PE”) is one part of that image. Changing our image requires changing our “product,” and “cool PE” is one potential solution. Most individuals’ last experiences in physical education were as students in secondary programs characterized by competitive team sports, nonteaching, and the “busy, happy, and good” model in which physical education was considered successful as long as everyone was moving and no one got hurt. These experiences left the public with the belief that that is the extent of physical education. So now many might think that if it looks like “old-school PE,” then it must still be “old-school PE.” To begin changing this stereotype, we must offer a product that is more in line with contemporary students’ interests and motivations. This is critical to our ability to be perceived as valuable and relevant in schools. “Cool PE” is one way in which our profession may be able to move forward.

**Submissions Welcome!**

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


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