EACH YEAR, SHAPE AMERICA – Society of Health and Physical Educators invites physical educators to attend Speak Out! Day in Washington, DC. I wish everyone could experience this event first-hand. Unfortunately, it may involve an expensive cross-country flight, hotel accommodations, and at least three days away from your job. However, advocating for quality physical education is something that we can all do in our schools and districts, as well as at the state level. Previous Advocacy in Action articles have addressed local advocacy initiatives (e.g., Bert, Constantinou, & Sims, 2010; Devore, 2015). The purpose of this article is to review five steps to create a state-level lobby day. These steps are: formulate, delegate, educate, locate and legislate!

By Greg Bert

STEP 1: FORMULATE

In Washington State, a cadre of five physical education teachers came together and decided to advocate at the state level by organizing our own “Physical Education State Lobby Day” (PESLD) in the state capital of Olympia. Formulate your own PESLD by sharing an interest/sign-up sheet at your next state association conference. Find out who would like to become involved in speaking, advocating and networking with state legislators and other physical educators. This is the beginning of your own “physical education legislative cadre” (PELC). In Washington State, an email was sent out to SHAPE Washington membership asking for volunteers to form a Washington State PELC. This email raised awareness and helped us gather enough volunteers to get our PELC up and running.

STEP 2: DELEGATE

Come up with a plan for who communicates with the PELC and the next steps to organizing a PESLD. The PELC needs to communicate with the state association so that all members are kept current on the goals and to make it clear that any member can join. Delegate who and how the word will get out regarding the duties, goals, and tasks of the PELC. Getting the word out that there is going to be a state PELC will excite many members. In Washington State, our PELC initially met and decided upon the goals and chose a date for the state lobby day. We decided to make appointments with our local legislators and go from there. We found this very simple to do; we just needed to pick up the phone.
Step 3: Educate

Make appointments with legislators well before the PESLD. This could include appointments with the state education committee members or your own district legislators. We decided that our first PESLD would be educational in nature. We asked what we wanted our legislators to know about physical education. This is the education piece. Educate your legislators about physical education issues in your state. What do physical education teachers need in your state to be successful? The Washington State PELC put together information packets to give to each legislator with whom we met. Our packets included some position papers from the SHAPE America website (http://www.shapeamerica.org) to educate each legislator about comprehensive physical education, physical literacy, quality physical education, and the National Standards. Also included was an introductory cover letter and personal business card (see Bert et al., 2010).

When meeting with legislators, remember that they have probably never heard of physical literacy, the National Standards, and so on. Their last impression of physical education could have involved dodgeball. Educate them! The Washington State PELC went as a group of four teachers. We informed each representative that we spoke on behalf of a larger state contingent of physical educators. We felt that important because legislators respond well to larger groups! We also informed them that this was going to be an annual event.

Step 4: Locate

Unique to the Washington State PESLD was the fact that our initial PELC members lived in close proximity to the state capital. Many physical educators feel disenfranchised by living many hours away from their state capital, let alone Washington, DC! For example, a physical educator living in San Diego, CA, may not be able to travel to Sacramento, CA. Locate physical educators living and teaching in and around your state’s capital and ask that they join the PELC. This is an important avenue to ensure that state legislators can meet face to face with a physical educator on a regular basis (Bert, Constantinou, & Sims, 2009). For example, I live and work 10 minutes away from Olympia, WA, and have met with legislators and testified before the Washington State House Education Committee to gain support for various physical education issues in Washington State. When one lives this close, it is easy to set up an afterschool appointment and meet with a legislator. Physical educators who live and teach in or near state capitals are in a unique position to advocate for physical education. Local physical educators have a special duty to meet regularly with legislators for some face-to-face advocacy time.

Step 5: Legislate

A PELC may also recommend future policy ideas to legislators. For example, in Washington State, outside vendors are being contracted to teach elementary physical education without teaching credentials! The Washington State PELC is working to reverse this trend by speaking to legislators at our annual PESLD.

When meeting with legislators, end by letting them know that an invitation to view a quality physical education lesson will be forthcoming. If we invite them to our classes, the legislators may become more connected to the overall mission of physical education and may be more willing to legislate for our causes! In Washington State, our PELC is sending invitations to legislators this fall to visit our classes and view quality physical education in action! It is important to make sure that the legislator hears back from the cadre. This will send the message that the PELC is serious about the issues and goals. After the initial meeting, send thank-you notes to each visited legislator. The notes can be used as the formal invitation for the legislator to come to your classroom so that he or she can see a lesson.

While this article has provided some guidelines for getting you started in creating a state-level PELC and organizing a PESLD, remember there is no formal step-by-step process for this to be successful (Bert, 2012). Plan what works best for your situation. Further, state-level advocacy can occur without a PESLD. Anyone can set up a meeting with a legislator on their own. They are only a phone call or email away. It is probably more effective to go as a small group, but advocating on your own is also valuable and worthwhile. Legislators appreciate it when a constituent takes the time and effort to meet personally, especially a teacher. Legislators love to be seen as proeducation! Speak out! And ... educate to legislate!

References

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