Despite the universally recognized importance of a physically active lifestyle and the ability of physical education (PE) to contribute to the knowledge and skills required for that lifestyle (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010), PE continues to be marginalized in school settings (Lux, 2011). This marginality creates inhospitable environments for PE teachers as they struggle for legitimacy while interacting with students, parents, colleagues and administrators (Richards, Templin, & Gaudreault, 2013). Physical educators may internalize feelings of marginalization, which can lead to them accepting their status as teachers of a less important subject. In turn, practices learned during teacher preparation may become washed out and beginning teachers may compromise their instruction (Blankenship & Coleman, 2009). As a result, it is critical that preservice teachers (PSTs) in PE learn strategies to help them advocate for the importance of their subject in and around school settings (Richards et al., 2013). This article briefly describes curricular and extracurricular activities from which teacher educators can draw in preparing PSTs to advocate for their subject.
Integration of Advocacy into Coursework

Richards and colleagues (2013) noted that physical education teacher education (PETE) faculty have a responsibility to prepare PSTs for the realities of life in schools, including marginality. Students should be taught tangible strategies for navigating challenging situations while maintaining fidelity to quality practices and advocating for the discipline. Richards (2015) described four steps in advocating for PE that could be used to frame such discussions. The first of these steps is to understand best practices for teaching PE, as guided by the National Standards (SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, 2014), and the second step is to adhere to these practices on a daily basis in one’s teaching. The third step involves proactive advocacy initiatives whereby the PE teacher educates others on the importance of the discipline in advance of it being questioned or threatened. Ideally, these efforts should help to prevent marginality and program reductions. The fourth step involves speaking out for the discipline in response to negative comments or threats to program stability.

Using this four-step approach, teacher educators can help students understand the importance of advocacy as a professional responsibility. They can structure activities across the PETE curriculum to help students develop proactive advocacy skills, while also teaching them how to stand up for themselves and the discipline when they experience marginality. Much of this approach can be woven into class discussions that take place in content and methods courses. For example, in a secondary methods course, faculty could discuss using bulletin boards in the sport education model as a way to display league standings and show others in the school what is happening in PE. Early field experiences and student teaching present another important opportunity for integrating advocacy. However, these experiences should be accompanied by on-campus seminars during which students dialogue about their experiences and get advice from teacher educators (Richards et al., 2013). These opportunities for reflection can deepen student learning and the increase the likelihood that they will use advocacy strategies in their own teaching.

Extracurricular Advocacy Training

Beyond the standard PETE curriculum, faculty can also engage students in a variety of extracurricular activities that build upon and reinforce the importance of advocacy. One such possibility at the local level is to encourage student involvement in PE majors’ clubs. These clubs provide students with opportunities to connect to one another and organize outreach events where they can practice promoting PE in community schools while also interacting with students and inservice professionals. Beyond the local level, professional organizations — such as SHAPE America and state associations — have a variety of resources related to advocacy that can be accessed online (e.g., SHAPE America’s Legislative Action Center at http://www.shapeamerica.org/advocacy) and through student-focused activities, such as leadership retreats.

Attendance at state and national conferences hosted by these professional organizations also gives students access to advocacy-focused sessions and opportunities to network with other PSTs and current practitioners. Emily Aros, a senior PE major at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL, attended the 2015 SHAPE America convention in Seattle, WA. Emily’s experience illustrates how attending a conference can forge connections among PSTs and in-service professionals that can ignite students’ passion for and commitment to teaching quality PE in the future:

Attending the SHAPE America convention in Seattle drastically changed the way that I think about my future profession as a PE teacher in a positive way. I learned so much about myself and how important PE is to me. I especially enjoyed the undergraduate-focused sessions, where speakers talked about how this field is advancing and changing all the time. It is our responsibility as future professionals to continue using the current best practices to advocate for the field. One thing that really stuck with me is the importance of technology. Social media, for example, can help to connect physical educators from all over the world and help them share great lesson ideas and assessment tools that can be used to enhance student involvement and learning. Being involved professionally has helped me grow as an individual, and being introduced to a network of enthusiastic professionals is a great reminder that PE teachers from all over the country have one important thing in common: we all want to focus on improving the quality of education, which, in turn, improves the likelihood that students will use what they have been taught to lead a healthy lifestyle in the future.

Several state associations sponsor advocacy or lobby days at which members meet with policymakers to discuss legislation that impacts PE. These opportunities allow PSTs to practice their advocacy skills and can also help them learn more about policy issues that affect PE teachers in their state. At the national level, SHAPE America hosts an annual SPEAK
Out! Day in Washington, DC (http://www.shapeamerica.org/events/speakoutday). Students who attend this event can gain a unique experience advocating for federal legislation that supports PE. Anna Ostrander, a junior PE major at Northern Illinois University, attended the 2015 SPEAK Out! Day and noted the reciprocal benefits of the experience. From Anna’s perspective, both attendees and the politicians with whom they spoke learned more about the issues stemming from federal legislation that affect PE:

Many politicians remember ‘old school’ PE classes and are not informed of the new best practices within our field. During SPEAK Out! Day, we were able to talk to Illinois politicians about the importance of providing our youth with quality health and PE. The politicians were not only willing to listen to what we had to say, but they seemed willing to support legislation that reinforces PE in U.S. schools. All of the feedback we received was very positive. Not only did the politicians learn about what we were advocating for, I was able to learn as well. Attending SPEAK Out! Day helped me to become more informed on the current issues and topics within the political world that impact health and PE. Additionally, SPEAK Out! Day allowed me to learn about the vital role that advocacy plays in my future profession, which is something not reinforced enough in the college curriculum. Without the event, many politicians may not see the true importance of quality health and PE and the significant role it plays within our schools. Overall, I found the event to be a tremendous success in advocating quality health and PE.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to promote advocacy training as part of a PETE curriculum to prepare PSTs for their careers in school settings (Richards et al., 2013). Curricular and extracurricular activities were described that could help PSTs develop the skills needed to combat marginality in schools. The authors believe that the future of the PE profession rests in the hands of the K–12 practitioners who carry its banners in schools every day. Unfortunately, many of these teachers work in environments that do not appreciate or value the contributions of PE to children’s holistic education. It is, therefore, critical that PETE includes as part of its core purpose the development of advocacy skills. Equipped with such skills, early-career teachers will be better prepared for the struggle for legitimacy that they may face (Lux, 2011). Advocacy skills can help beginning teachers navigate challenging school contexts while remaining faithful to the best practices they learned during PETE (Blankenship & Coleman, 2009).

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.

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