I don’t mind showing my age by referring to the late Walt Kelly’s classic cartoon character Pogo, who I enjoyed reading in the Sunday funnies. Pogo’s observation, “We have met the enemy, and he is us,” was originally uttered as sarcasm related to the pollution problem and to encourage people to become involved in the beginnings of Earth Day back in 1970. It took liberties with the original quote from Captain Oliver Hazard Perry after his victory in the Battle of Lake Erie (1813). But, this same theory can be applied to physical education. If we consider the lack of quality comprehensive physical education programs across the nation, and take a quick glance in the mirror, are we looking at the solution or just another part of the problem?

Most of us who have spent any time with legislators advocating for even minimal physical education requirements have seen that look, or heard that story about how bad their experience was in physical education. Recently I heard a former teacher/coach/athletic director, who is now a state legislator, testify before an education committee and tell them there was nothing wrong with telling a student to “drop and give me 30,” as an appropriate form of classroom management! The good news is he is no longer a teacher; however he is still influential in his former district.

Unfortunately, we know that in too many cases students are still coming away with the same experience today. There are many dedicated professionals fighting to educate people at all levels as to what a quality, standards-based physical education program can do for children. But are there enough?

If you are reading this, I assume that you are one of the modern professionals who are working toward solutions, and you don’t fit the, “and he is us,” part of Pogo’s observation. But ask yourself, “What have I done lately, and is it enough?” There are some of you that are doing absolutely everything you can. But for most of us, maybe we just need some fresh ideas from others that we haven’t tried.

No matter how hard we try, there will always be some physical educators who want to teach within their comfort zone. They will resist change, regardless of what the evidence shows and supports. Administrators at all levels may throw up roadblocks, but usually it is because they have also become comfortable in their old ways and need proof that what you are preaching is a better way.

Too many of our colleagues, though they may believe the old way is wrong, will cave in because they just don’t feel they can fight the system. This is one of the groups we need to reinvigorate. There is nothing new that will make them jump up and charge forward, but let’s look at some ideas at several levels that might help.

At the state and national level, are they actively participating in efforts to include physical education as part of the core curriculum and establishing minimal mandated minutes of instruction, let alone the recommended minutes from NASPE? Contact your state AHPERD for ideas of how they can get involved, and take advantage of the materials available on the NASPE website at www.naspeinfo.org. Position papers,
information regarding “What is a quality physical education program,” resource briefs on many topics, and Power Point templates on several issues are available. The AAHPERD Advocacy page will tell you how to contact your Senators and Representatives.

Similar information for your state can be obtained through the state AHPERD. Ask them what they are doing at the state level and how you can get involved. Who do you need to talk to? Do they have a larger group, such as a coalition of many groups with the same or complimentary goals? For example, in Michigan we are fortunate to be part of the Healthy Kids, Healthy Michigan: Coalition for Healthy Weight in Children. The coalition recognized that one of the things our state needed was improved requirements for health education and physical education, and has been instrumental in getting legislation introduced.

The old axiom, “all politics is local,” rings true. There certainly isn’t a singular path that will get the job done. Combine the state and local effort by meeting with state legislators at their home office or in a local setting.

Will you be successful if it is just you, and other physical educators pushing the topic? Probably not. So, how will you build a larger group of local constituents? Do you have administrators in your district that buy into your program? Principals? Superintendent? Other teachers in your building and district? Maybe you have already created a wellness group on your staff that can provide support. Do you have evidence of the success of your program? Do you have parents that will back you? The latter can be a key element. Many of you are more connected to the community than other teachers because of the sheer number of students you have contact with, and hopefully, you have cultivated a positive relationship with their parents.

Politicians listen to their constituents, no matter whether they are a state Representative or a school board member. It is one of the strongest tools out there, and it has to be addressed at multiple levels.

There just isn’t enough space to address the issues in this one column, but I would love to hear your suggestions and success stories. Please send them to mahperded@gmail.com, and I will share them in the future.

Pogo was right, and he was wrong. SOME of our people are obstacles to progress, but with continued effort, those numbers will dwindle. Keep fighting!

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