In his inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy challenged the nation to “Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country.” Recent research has shed some light on the origin of that line in his famous speech. In high school, a young Kennedy heard one of his teachers asking a similar question, but pertaining to their school — what can they as students do for their school? In that same vein of questioning, we as physical educators must ask ourselves: What can we as physical educators do for our students, our profession, our schools, and our organizations to advocate for quality physical education?

In the present school climate, the rate of physical education programs being cut, eliminated, and marginalized has become increasingly alarming. Often, school administrators believe that eliminating and minimizing physical education will give more time to “academic” subjects because it is easy to do and saves money. It is easy to cut physical education because it is one of the untested subjects (physical education is not listed as a core subject in No Child Left Behind). In addition, physical education often does not have large school booster club representation, fundraising opportunities, or a large parent following.

As physical educators, what can we do to change this climate? We can attack this problem through educating administrators, parents, and students with two focuses. The first focus is to do a better job of promoting the health benefits of daily physical education and activity in regards to preventing childhood obesity and Type II diabetes. The second focus is to proclaim the latest information in cognitive neuroscience to these stakeholders. This information implicitly states that there is a positive correlation between healthy, fit students and academic success in the classroom.

Following are some ideas of what can be done at schools to educate others about the importance of physical education:

- Form your own physical education booster club. Invite parents to help.
- Organize physical education fundraisers (e.g., walkathons, garage sales, T-shirts, etc.). Advertising the fundraisers will make your programs more visible.
- Organize a “FITT Club” at your school.
- Organize before-school running in the gym clubs.
- Email parents a class newsletter to educate them on the importance of daily quality physical education.
- Ask parents to come in and observe or help in class.
- Invite school officials, administrators, school board members, and local legislators to observe a class.
- Come up with a feature story idea that might interest the local paper; invite the local paper to observe a class.
- Become a National Board Certified Teacher in physical education if you already are not one.
- Become indispensable and re-make yourself into a leader at your school. Teach yourself about the links between cognitive neuroscience and physical activity. Educate classroom teachers on this topic. Ask your principal...
to lead a staff-in-service pertaining to activity in the classroom. Part of becoming indispensable is being proactive and finding ways to teach others the positive benefits of physical education and physical activity.

- Familiarize yourself with the leaders in the field who are reporting and discovering the links between exercise and cognition, such as John Ratey (johcratey.com), John Medina (brainrules.com), Dr. Charles Hillman (University of Illinois), Phillip Tomporowski (University of Georgia), John Sallis (San Diego State University), Debbie Kibbee (Georgia Health Policy Center), Catherine Davis (Georgia Prevention Institute), and Matt Mahar (East Carolina University). Educate your school faculty, parents, and local policymakers about this research.
- Find a classroom in your building and create an activity-based classroom, complete with physioballs for chairs, stretch bands, and other activity-based exercise equipment suitable for a classroom.
- Find a staff member who will help pilot an activity-based classroom for students.
- Create a fitness center at your own school for both students and staff members. Low on budget? Begin with jump ropes, physioballs, and stretch bands.
- Come up with your own action research and record data on how long it takes for a student’s heart rate to level off to resting heart rate after exercise in their target heart rate zone. Compare the GPA’s of your more active students with those less active, or pre- and post-test your students’ fitness scores and report the data to school officials. In short, make your own local discoveries known.

Advocating for physical education can be fun and rewarding but it takes hard work and dedication. However, you can do it by adding a few of these ideas to your program. Our programs are great advocacy tools which display our teaching and our profession for others to see. So, in remembering the words of one famous President, who by the way was very concerned about the physical fitness of our nation’s youth and inspired a nation to move forward and be the leader in discovery: Let’s all ask ourselves, what can we do for physical education?

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