

## MD's Anne Arundel County Schools Celebrate New Unified PE and Dance Courses

**Issue:** As a large school system, Maryland's Anne Arundel County Public Schools (AACPS) has always looked for ways to provide a world-class curriculum to all students. Part of the county school system's strategic plan includes efforts to reach a vision where "all means ALL."

In the physical education program, educators have strived to make the classroom a place where all students are welcome and experience success — a demanding task considering class sizes of 40 students, small spaces, and teachers who have little to no experience working with students with disabilities.

The teachers also want physical education to be meaningful and fun because — particularly at the secondary level — it is typically the only class that students with



Students from the Unified Dance and Leadership course perform at the end-of-semester celebration.

**SHAPE America** – Society of Health and Physical Educators is the national organization that serves as the voice for 200,000+ health and physical education professionals across the nation. Since its founding in 1885, the organization has defined excellence in physical education, and our National Standards for K-12 Physical Education serve as the foundation for well-designed physical education programs across the country. We provide programs, resources and advocacy that support an inclusive, active, kinder, and healthier school culture and champion health and physical educators at every level, from preschool to university graduate programs. Our extensive community includes members, advocates and supporters, as well as 51 state affiliate organizations (including the District of Columbia). Together we are working, in and out of schools, to prepare every child to lead a healthy, physically active life. For more information, visit [shapeamerica.org](http://shapeamerica.org).

disabilities have with their peers. However, despite offering a variety of fitness-based course options for high school students, AACPS physical education teachers continued to have a difficult time providing a meaningful experience for students with disabilities.

**The Big Idea:** To address this issue, AACPS Coordinator of Health, Physical Education and Dance Christiana Walsh, a SHAPE America member, decided to create physical education and dance courses which would allow students of all abilities to participate collectively in developmentally appropriate activities.

This would include not only physical education and dance content but also leadership activities where students with disabilities and without disabilities ("peer buddies") would work together to increase competence and confidence in a variety of

physical activities and life skills.

"The goal was to empower students to create a more inclusive and accepting school environment for the entire student body at their respective schools," said Walsh. "We wanted to develop leadership skills in all students, not just the peer buddies."

The two courses — Unified Physical Education and Leadership and Unified Dance and Leadership — would mirror AACPS' very successful Unified Sports program in athletics, which has equal numbers of students with and without disabilities working together to reach a common goal.

"Our county has been providing Unified Sports as an interscholastic option for almost 10 years," said Walsh. "We hoped to jump on the success of this program and bring it into the physical education class and dance class."



Unified PE and Unified Dance students and teachers from all five participating high schools participated in the end-of-semester celebration.

**Implementation:** To get the courses off the ground, Walsh called on her leadership team to write the course proposals. Nick Klug, SHAPE America member and secondary physical education resource teacher, Deb Marcus, SHAPE America member and adapted physical education resource teacher, and Nicole Deming, dance teacher specialist, ran with Walsh's vision.

After getting approval from the grading and transcript offices at the district level, they selected three physical education teachers and two dance teachers to help write the curriculums during the summer. These five teachers worked tirelessly to put together inclusive classes that would incorporate a leadership component, wellness component, and physical education/dance skill component into each lesson.

The curriculum team paired Special Olympics leadership lessons with "typical" physical education units such as Fitness

& Wellness, Team Sports, Lifetime Sports, Individual Performance, and Rhythms & Dance.

**Results:** The new Unified courses were offered at five schools during the 2018-2019 academic year — and to say they were successful would be an understatement. Teachers reported that

their students with and without disabilities flourished in the class.

Ruby Fischer, a student at Annapolis High School shared the following: "This has seriously become my favorite class. I love the new friends I have made, and I get excited when I see them in the hallway. I look forward to class all the time."

Each school saw great success not only in their physical education and dance departments but throughout the entire school building. They all embraced the inclusive culture and worked to advocate for unity and acceptance of differences.

"This course has created a special bond between all students and staff," said Heather Arnold, Unified Physical Education and Leadership teacher at Old Mill High School.

An end-of-semester celebration in January included teachers and students from all five schools, as well as the AACPS

### Program Team

**Christiana Walsh**, AACPS Coordinator of Health, Physical Education and Dance

**Deb Marcus**, AACPS Adapted Physical Education Resource Teacher

**Nicole Deming**, AACPS Dance Teacher Specialist

**Nick Klug**, AACPS Secondary Physical Education Resource Teacher

**Tim Stedman**, Northeast High School, Physical Educator

**Heather Arnold**, Old Mill High School, Physical Educator

**Mike Gimón**, Chesapeake High School, Physical Educator

**Sarah Mitchell Sherman**, Meade High School, Dance Educator

**Sarah Francis**, Annapolis Middle School, Dance Educator

**Zach Vrhovac**, Broadneck High School, Physical Educator

superintendent of schools, president of the Board of Education, members of the executive team, and special education leadership.

For the 2019-2020 school year, four more AACPS high schools will add one or both Unified courses, bringing the total to nine schools. In the future, AACPS hopes to offer the Unified Physical Education and Unified Dance courses in all of the county's 12 high schools and 19 middle schools.



### SHAPE America's National Standards for Physical Education

The physically literate individual:

- ✓ Demonstrates competency in a variety of motor skills and movement patterns.
- ✓ Applies knowledge of concepts, principles, strategies and tactics related to movement and performance.
- ✓ Demonstrates the knowledge and skills to achieve and maintain a health-enhancing level of physical activity and fitness.
- ✓ Exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others.
- ✓ Recognizes the value of physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and/or social interaction.

### 50 Million Strong by 2029

is SHAPE America's commitment to put all children on the path to health and physical literacy through effective health and physical education programs. Across the country, HPE teachers and other supporters are making an impact by taking action in the following areas:

- ✓ Effective Instruction
- ✓ Healthy Behaviors & Physical Activity
- ✓ Advocacy

Want to know how you can make an impact? Learn more at [shapeamerica.org/50million](http://shapeamerica.org/50million).

