

Changing School Cultures Through Unified Physical Education

Issue: Through adapted physical education (APE) classes, students with special needs have the opportunity to safely and successfully participate in physical education, and learn fitness and wellness skills that can prepare them for a lifetime of healthy activities. However, for students with visual and hearing impairments, cerebral palsy, autism, Down syndrome, muscular dystrophy, or other disabilities, genuine inclusion remains a significant challenge. How can schools overcome the feelings of isolation experienced by kids with disabilities — and help foster life-enriching friendships between special education and general education students?

The Big Idea: For Mike Doyle, physical education/developmental adapted physical education (DAPE) teacher at Wayzata High School in Plymouth, MN, a large suburb of Minneapolis, his “aha moment” occurred

SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators is the nation’s largest membership organization of health and physical education professionals. The organization sets the standard for health and physical education in the U.S., and its National Standards for K-12 Physical Education serve as the foundation for well-designed physical education programs across the country. SHAPE America was also a proud member of the coalition that developed the National Health Education Standards, and is a founding partner of the Presidential Youth Fitness Program, *Let’s Move!* Active Schools and the Jump Rope For Heart/Hoops For Heart programs.



at the SHAPE America Washington conference in 2015 during a session on Special Olympics about the concept of Unified Physical Education. Doyle had always been intrigued by the idea that students with and without disabilities could come together through ongoing physical and educational activities. After consulting with state Special Olympics leaders, he decided to introduce a Unified PE class into the Wayzata curriculum. The course would bring together students with and without disabilities for physical activities and sports, with the goal of enhancing the physical, intellectual and social growth of all. He began by reaching out to student leaders to see if they might be interested in taking the new elective.

Two hours away, in Proctor Public Schools near Duluth, MN, another SHAPE America

teacher also decided to pilot a Unified PE class. Lisa Smith, a PE/health/DAPE teacher and Special Olympics coach, pitched the concept to several incoming seniors, asking them if they wanted to be part of a pioneering class. She launched the program in the gym, where individualism and inclusion could naturally coexist, and later expanded it as an after-school club, offering diverse activities such as pottery-making and karaoke.

Nick Cedergren, Schools and Youth Coordinator

for Special Olympics Minnesota, was instrumental in helping both Doyle and Smith launch programs in 2016.

Integrating special education and general education students into a single class was radical for both schools. Doyle and Smith shared ideas with one another throughout the pilot process and were enthusiastic and optimistic, but neither teacher could have predicted how popular their programs would become — or the profound, far-reaching, and positive effects they would have on their schools.

Implementation: Doyle began his quarterly Unified PE class with a core of 10 adapted and 15 general education students hand-picked from Wayzata’s 3,500-student population, and the buzz spread within a few days. “Kids told their friends how much fun it was, and after



works closely with her general education students to help them better understand their classmates' needs and to brainstorm ideas for adaptation. "The general education students really 'think outside the box' about new ways to teach their classmates," she says.

Doyle's students have

the first quarter, I had students who were literally crying, asking me if they could take it again," says Doyle.

The class focused on increasing physical fitness and sport-specific skills, rules, and strategies, as well as reinforcing positive habits and reasoning to make better health and lifestyle choices.

In the much smaller Proctor School District, Smith's Unified PE class included the same 12 general education students, with adapted students participating on a rotating basis. Both teachers had the full guidance and support of their principals, whose common goal was for their schools to become more inclusive.

Takeaway: The program naturally fosters new friendships among the Unified PE classmates and promotes students' leadership and social competencies. Smith

found the class to be an eye-opening experience. "I have never really interacted with kids in special ed but now I view them through a lens I never thought I would have," notes one student.

The lives of the special education students are enriched beyond measure when the walls isolating them from other students come down and friendships and trust are built in their place.

Results: Both Doyle and Smith cite countless examples illustrating their programs' overwhelming success — from waiting lists of students wanting to sign up to glowing parent testimonials to seniors who now are interested in teaching special education as a career.

"I've talked to parents who were in tears, grateful that their child with special needs got a phone call for the first time

Project Team

Proctor Public Schools

Lisa Smith, PE, Health and Developmental Adapted PE (DAPE) Teacher and Special Olympics Head Coach

Tim Rohweder, Principal Middle and High School

Wayzata High School

Mike Doyle, PE, Developmental Adapted PE Teacher

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Nick Cedergren, Schools and Youth Coordinator

to go bowling on a Friday night or join classmates for a Sadie Hawkins Day Dance," says Doyle. "The students danced together all night."

One student cheerleader in the Unified PE program hosted a cheerleading camp for her special ed buddies, and the participants performed together at a school basketball game.

"The kids have made friendships they never thought they would have," says Smith. "They're eating together in the cafeteria and planning social events together outside of school. This has changed the culture of the entire school for the better. It's beautiful."



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.

Additional Resources

Links to more information about this program can be found at shapeamerica.org/casestudies.



50 Million Strong by 2029 is SHAPE America's commitment to empower all children to lead healthy and active lives through effective health and physical education programs.