Preparing Physical Educators for the Role of Physical Activity Director

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During her first year of teaching at Mountain Top Middle School, Lilly Rose learns that the school has just started a wellness committee. Composed of two grade-level teachers, the assistant principal, the cafeteria supervisor, and the school nurse, the committee is charged with promoting overall wellness for the school community. Ms. Rose attends the first meeting and learns that this year the committee will focus on physical activity promotion. To her surprise and dismay, the committee was putting forth ideas such as having students run laps during physical education and then during lunch. They also mentioned lining students up in the halls for daily stretching. Lilly tells the group about a comprehensive physical activity program she learned about during her physical education teacher preparation courses. The committee is impressed and wants to hear more. Lilly suggests working to implement one or two of the ideas she learned in her undergraduate training and expanding the program from there. Although this is her first year of teaching, Lilly feels that she, as the only physical education teacher at the school, is the best qualified person to lead the program. Thanks to her university courses, she is prepared to take on the role of school physical activity director.

Change in educational programming and policy is inevitable. To this end, new teachers must be prepared to navigate the current school climate as well as have skills that are adaptable to future school reforms. Since June 1, 2006, schools receiving federal funding for a school meal program must develop and create a school wellness policy (Public Law 108-265, 2004). The wellness policy must address the school’s role in improving food service and the provision of physical activity opportunities for students. This mandate was intended to address health issues like childhood obesity and juvenile diabetes, in response to the call for schools to take on a leadership role in promoting physical activity for students, staff, and faculty (National Association for Sport and Physical Education [NASPE], 2008; Pate et al., 2006). In short, although schools have long been recognized as an ideal location for physical activity and health promotion, their role as leaders in these efforts is now being advocated. If schools are, in fact, to take a leadership role in physical activity promotion, this begs the question, “Who leads the leader?”

In a recent two-part feature, JOPERD published a series of articles discussing the role of schools in promoting physical activity. Specifically, Castelli and Beighle (2007) argued that the physical educator is the ideal person in a school to take on the role of leader of the comprehensive school-based physical activity program (CSPAP). This leader is referred to as the school “physical activity director” (PAD). Physical educators are best suited for this role because they are the most qualified to work with students and physical activity. The preparation of physical education teachers for these roles falls on the shoulders of physical education teacher education (PETE) programs. That is, if physical educators are to take on the role of a PAD, PETE programs must prepare them for this role. Although physical educators are the most qualified
persons to be PADs, most PETE programs do little to prepare educators specifically for this role. Thus, the purpose of this article is three-fold: (1) to give a brief overview of CSPAPs and the role of PADs, (2) to discuss the skills needed by physical education teacher candidates to be PADs, and (3) to provide potential learning experiences for teacher candidates that can be integrated into existing courses.

**Comprehensive School-Based Physical Activity Programs**

Pate and colleagues (2006) recommended that schools provide a comprehensive, multifaceted approach to physical activity promotion. Components of such a program can include physical education, classroom physical activity, recess or activity breaks, staff wellness, and community and parental involvement. To maximize the effectiveness of these programs, it is essential that they be grounded in quality physical education. However, it is important that physical activity promotion move beyond the gymnasium and physical education classroom. To this end, researchers are beginning to examine the feasibility and effectiveness of several components of CSPAP. Classroom-based physical activity can include (1) activity breaks throughout the school day; (2) classroom activities that integrate physical activity into academic content; and (3) physical activity logging or journaling, all of which have been found effective with youths (Ernst & Pangrazi, 1999; Mahar et al., 2006; Pangrazi, Beighle, Vehige, & Vack, 2003). Other researchers have found that classroom-based physical activity is particularly effective in reducing off-task behavior and increasing attentiveness, the two most-often-cited barriers to student learning (Ahamed et al., 2007). Recess, or activity breaks at the secondary level, is also a time when students can accumulate meaningful activity (Beighle, Morgan, Le Masurier, & Pangrazi, 2006; Jago & Baranowski, 2004). Strategies such as providing equipment, introducing equipment, and using playground supervisors have all proved effective.

A secondary objective of CSPAP is to increase adult physical activity, because modeling remains an effective method of behavior change, particularly among elementary school students. Staff wellness activities such as group exercise, walking clubs, and weight-loss competitions have been found effective for this purpose (Eaton, Marx, & Bowie, 2007). In addition, the importance of parents and social support for promoting physical activity in youths is clear (Welk, Wood, & Morss, 2003). Efforts to involve parents and the community can include physical education nights, active open-house events, physical activity calendars, and school carnivals based on physical activity (Lambdin & Erwin, 2007; Morgan & Morgan, 2004). Other school-wide strategies that may involve other organizations include the walking school bus (Heelan et al., 2008), walk-to-school week, intramurals, and weight-training clubs at the secondary level.

Implementation of an effective CSPAP relies on the physical educator becoming the person responsible for facilitating the program, which involves developing a committee, creating a long-term plan, organizing event committees, serving as the school liaison for committees, and conducting events as necessary. It is, however, unreasonable to expect the physical educator to plan, conduct, and attend every physical activity promotional event. Instead, the PAD simply coordinates these opportunities. Because implementation of the CSPAP is rooted in a quality physical education experience, the authors recommend that new teachers take the time to solidify their physical education program first, before beginning the process of initiating a CSPAP. With time, commitment, and good old-fashioned hard work, an effective CSPAP can become a reality.

**Requisite Skills and Knowledge for a PAD**

When training future physical educators to become PADs, PETE programs must consider the specific components of a CSPAP and the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively implement these components. Based on the components, PADs need to be knowledgeable about and competent in a variety of areas. Below are examples of skills and knowledge that PADs should possess. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but rather an overview of requisite basic skills and knowledge. Also, it is important to note that what is presented may not be unique to PAD preparation; however, as will be seen in the learning experiences discussed later, the application of the knowledge or skill is unique to CSPAPs.

**Organization and Administration.** Physical activity directors must be able to organize and administer a variety of events, tasks, and groups specific to a CSPAP. They should be prepared to develop and plan a long-term CSPAP comprising achievable short-term objectives. They should also understand basic concepts related to marketing or promoting physical activity events at the school. Experience in creating fliers, newsletters, or other means for communicating with parents will be valuable. Strong communication skills, verbal and written, are crucial. Physical activity directors must be able to articulate the objectives and rationale of the CSPAP effectively to a variety of audiences—from parents, to students, to administrators, to physicians.

**Public Health.** Teacher candidates should be well versed in the importance of physical activity promotion from both a physical education and public health perspective (Sallis & McKenzie, 1991). Physical activity directors should understand the health benefits of physical activity and be able to use this information to justify CSPAPs. Teacher candidates need to be prepared to teach goal-setting and self-management skills that students can use to monitor their own behaviors, including physical activity levels (McKenzie, 2007). Exposure to basic strategies for planning health promotion programs will also prove helpful to future PADs. Although an in-depth knowledge of this content would be ideal, a foundational understanding of assessing a school’s physical activity needs, developing a plan, and modifying the program based on evaluation could be utilized. This process resembles the development of assessments and lesson modification already taught in PETE programs.
Advocacy. The importance of collaboration and networking cannot be emphasized enough when considering the development and implementation of a CSPAP. An effective CSPAP requires the assistance of numerous other school professionals and volunteers. For this reason, the ability to communicate effectively and network is a necessity. Teacher candidates should be exposed to strategies for seeking and finding individuals to support their program. For example, PTAs, community organizations (e.g., homeowners associations, churches, local nonprofit organizations like the American Red Cross), and local businesses are all potential collaborators. The significance of meeting with administrators, school board members, or other influential community leaders to explain the CSPAP should be emphasized to future PADs. Support from these key individuals is essential for the establishment and progress of the program.

Physical Activity. While PETE programs typically emphasize the importance of promoting physical activity during physical education, PADs promote physical activity engagement beyond physical education class as well. For this reason, teacher candidates must learn strategies for integrating physical activity in the classroom and throughout the school day (see below for ideas). But first, they must learn strategies for working with classroom teachers to gain access into the classroom. For example, inviting a classroom teacher to the gymnasium to see a lesson that integrates classroom academic content is a great way to open the conversation about integrating physical activity into the classroom. Teacher candidates must also be aware of methods for increasing activity during recess, such as teaching recess games early in the physical education curriculum (Beighle et al., 2006; Jago & Baranowski, 2004). Preparation programs should teach strategies for enhancing out-of-school physical activity opportunities, such as collaborating with program providers to train before- and after-school staff and little league coaches. Knowledge about how to motivate youths to be physically active will also prove valuable for PADs. Exposure to staff-wellness programming and issues related to this type of program will be useful to PADs as well.

A variety of skills and knowledge necessary to become an effective PAD have been presented. The beauty of preparing teacher candidates to be PADs is that the skills required to become a PAD are typically addressed in other PETE courses. With slight modifications of many concepts already taught in PETE programs and implementation of thoughtful learning experiences, PETE programs can effectively prepare future PADs by providing teacher candidates with the requisite skills and conceptual knowledge.

Learning Experiences

The following assignments represent authentic tasks that are easily integrated into a PETE curriculum. Yet, it is important to note that these assignments do not focus on preparing teacher candidates to conduct quality physical education, as those are addressed elsewhere. Aligning a course assignment with a field experience requiring implementation or enactment of these strategies would further enhance the learning experiences. Given the differences between PETE programs, the authors do not make recommendations for where or how to integrate these activities into the curriculum, but instead leave this up to the reader. However, the assignments below serve as learning experiences to prepare teacher candidates to be effective PADs.

Develop List of Minimal Equipment Activities. An effective
CSPAP includes strategies for promoting activity in the gymnasium during physical education, during the remainder of the school day, and at home as well. Therefore, physical education curricula should include activities in which students can participate outside of physical education, namely at home and at recess. Because equipment is often unavailable for students to use at home (i.e., away from the physical education class), teacher candidates can develop a list of 10 to 15 activities requiring little or no equipment that could be taught to students. These activities can be most effective if introduced early in the school year, because elementary students then know additional activities in which they can participate at recess. The lists from the teacher candidates are then compiled, and each teacher candidate leaves the class with as many as 100 minimal equipment activities.

Develop Strategies for Increasing Recess Activity. Teacher candidates can develop strategies for increasing physical activity during recess. For example, they may decide to utilize activity zones, in which sections of the playground are zoned off for specific types of physical activity. They then visit a school, and with the physical education teacher’s assistance, implement their ideas. Lastly, they write a one- or two-page paper on the experience and describe whether or not it was effective. How they determine “effectiveness” should be described. For example, the teacher candidates may count the number of students who use equipment before and after the intervention. A strategy that increases equipment use on the playground may be considered “effective.”

Write One-Page “Getting Started” Plan. Creating a series of strategies and materials for promoting physical activity in the schools is a great start. However, teacher candidates must leave PETE programs with a written plan. For this assignment, candidates write a step-by-step approach that they will take to develop a school-based physical activity program when they begin teaching. For example, the first step would be to create a CSPAP committee of interested stakeholders. See Pangrazi (2007) for a detailed description of steps for program development.

Evaluate Impact of a District Wellness Policy. Teacher candidates first obtain and read the wellness policies of local districts. Knowledge of a district’s wellness policy is critical in working towards implementing that policy. Candidates can compare and contrast different policies and discuss (e.g., via writing assignment, class discussion, online discussion) ways in which these policies attempt to increase physical activity. Next, through observations at schools in the districts, candidates use gathered evidence (e.g. interviews, recess observation, classroom observation) to report on policy implementation and the impact the policy has on the school environment.

Discuss Implementation of Short Activity Breaks. One responsibility of the PAD is to assist classroom teachers with integrating physical activity in the classroom. Because classroom teachers are trained to teach sedentary students, the thought of getting students up and moving often intimidates them. The purpose of a discussion in the PETE class is to generate strategies for PADS to use in order to help classroom teachers implement activity breaks. For example, the PAD could volunteer to teach a short activity break or create a short video clip for classroom teachers that would demonstrate physical activity management techniques. Teacher candidates then work in the schools to either implement these strategies or discuss the feasibility of the strategies with current classroom teachers.

Create Physical Activity Promotion Plan. The development of a physical activity promotion plan will assist future physical educators with ideas for encouraging students and possibly faculty/staff to become more physically active before, during, or after school. For this learning experience, teacher candidates are given a scenario indicating that most students in their school are sedentary. As a result, the soon-to-be physical educators must create an activity, club, or program that will increase the physical activity levels of students and others in the school. Part of the promotion plan must include components of the CSPAPs discussed earlier. Teacher candidates should indicate starting and ending dates, target audience, location, equipment needed, personnel required, and approximate cost for the plan to be effective. In addition, they must show how they will measure physical activity and determine the success of their program.

Generate Strategies for Communicating with Parents. Teacher candidates work in groups of three to four to develop a list of strategies for communicating with parents. Other than the obvious phone calls or emails, ideas may include producing newsletters and physical activity calendars (Hager & Beighle, 2006), covering car line to meet and greet parents, volunteering at a PTA function, creating a web site, and attending other school events. All of these ideas allow the PAD to meet and interact with parents and community members. If feasible, candidates should develop and implement one of these strategies.

Design Point-of-Decision Prompts. To be active during school and outside of class, some students may need extra encouragement via point-of-decision prompts. For this assignment, candidates use Microsoft PowerPoint or any other presentation software to create prompt signs (task cards) or posters that can be placed around the gymnasium, around the school, or on the playground. Figure 1 is an example of a recess point-of-decision prompt.

Create Physical Activities for Classroom Teachers. Teacher candidates can create physical activities that classroom teachers can use to incorporate physical activity in their classroom. At least one of the activities must integrate academic content from an area outside of physical education (e.g., mathematics, science). Proprietary activities such as Active and Healthy Schools Activity Cards, Energizers, and Take 10! can be used as examples, but candidates must create their own five- to 10-minute activities. The activities are then peer-taught in a classroom setting or taught to elementary students during a field experience at a local elementary school.

Create Physical Activity Video for the Classroom. One strategy for getting youths active in the classroom is to use an
activity video. Nowadays, many classrooms have a television and DVD player available. For this assignment, during the student-teaching semester, teacher candidates choreograph, record, and distribute an activity DVD for all classrooms in their school. Examples of ideas include using a local university mascot to perform five to 10 minutes of simple aerobic activities, recruiting students to perform simple activities to music, or having the student teacher perform a series of basic activities that students can complete by their desks.

**Develop Staff-Wellness Program.** One strategy for getting students more active is to gain teacher and staff buy-in. This can be obtained by providing a physical activity program for them. Candidates develop an activity designed to get teachers and staff more active. Examples include holding a simple aerobics class in the gym after school or implementing a steps-per-day goal-setting program for teachers using pedometers. The assignment is completed by teacher candidates in the form of a five-minute Microsoft PowerPoint presentation to the class.

**Develop Event that Involves Parents.** Teacher candidates can create a flier that advertises an event they plan for the purpose of inviting parents into the school to learn more about physical education and physical activity. Ideas include physical education nights (Morgan & Morgan, 2004), demo nights, a Jump Rope for Heart evening, or an open house with activity stations throughout the school. The flier must be attractive and concise, yet thorough. In addition to the flier, candidates write a detailed, one-page synopsis describing the event. A continuation of this project could allow candidates to assist a local school in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the event.

**Develop Strategies for Community Collaboration.** Working in small groups, teacher candidates can brainstorm strategies for working with the community. Ideas include working with after-school organizations to train staff to implement quality physical activity experiences, collaborating with youth sport organizations to train coaches, and developing relationships with local business to sponsor charity walks or help organize walk-to-school events. Teacher candidates can also work with Special Olympics and Little Olympics to gain experience dealing with youths and develop an understanding of the impact of community collaboration. Physical educators often express frustration when asked to share the gymnasium with after-school programs because their teaching space is habitually left in disarray. Teacher candidates can focus on tactics for keeping their space and equipment in good shape, such as creating a contract with the organization sharing the space (Lambdin & Erwin, 2007).

In conclusion, as the field of physical education begins to adopt the role of physical activity promotion, it is important that physical educators take the lead in school-based physical activity promotion. In order for physical educators to do this, PETE programs must evolve with the field and begin preparing future physical educators not only to be quality physical educators but quality physical activity professionals. These learning experiences are just a beginning for what PETE professionals can do to prepare a future generation of physical activity directors.

**References**


on exercise when teaching concepts related to fitness and physical activity.

References

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