

PEDAGOGY

Making a Case for Physical Education Teacher Education as a Viable Degree Program in Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

Physical education teacher education (PETE) programs are responsible for the development and preparation of future physical education teachers and, at the K–12 level, physical education is an essential part of a curriculum that promotes the whole child. PETE programs in colleges and universities are therefore critical to the future of K–12 physical education programs, because it is the PETE program and faculty who will prepare the next generation of physical educators in the United States. Quality physical education programs benefit students both academically and physically; K–12 students who are healthy and active are better prepared to learn and grow. Physical education programs must provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to participate in a lifetime of physical activity and healthy habits. Quality PETE programs graduate certified physical educators who are equipped to be successful in schools and who understand the value of creating a culture of health and wellness within the school setting.

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Quality physical education (PE) programs in schools can be a major contributor to each student's health, physical fitness, and academic performance. Furthermore, PE is a critical component in teaching the whole child. Therefore, universities that prepare future physical educators have a vital role in educating those who will equip students with the knowledge and skills to have a healthy body and a healthy mind.

Physical Education Is a Critical Component in Schools

Numerous national organizations and groups have proclaimed the need for physical activity and PE in schools. One such organization, SHAPE America, strives to empower today's youth to participate at the highest possible level in PE and strives to support participation in activity outside of schools. SHAPE America's (n.d.-a) initiative 50 Million Strong (50MS) brings awareness to the health-related challenges of childhood overweight and obesity that face children today and lead them to a healthier life by high school graduation in 2029. An important goal of this initiative is for schools to offer quality PE provided by certified PE teachers.

Quality PE "provides a planned, sequential, K-12 standards-based program of curricula and instruction designed to develop motor skills, knowledge and behaviors for healthy, active living, physical fitness, sportsmanship, self-efficacy and emotional intelligence" (SHAPE America, 2015). Every student in elementary school should participate in 150 min of PE weekly, and students in middle and high schools should have 225 min of PE weekly, throughout the academic year (SHAPE America, n.d.-b).

PE is an important part of educating the whole child. In 2014, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention developed the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child model to ensure that students are healthy, safe, supported, engaged, challenged, and poised for success. This model encourages integration and collaboration between education and health to improve cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development in students (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, n.d.). PE is a central tenet of the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child approach

and PE teacher education (PETE) programs must prepare future teachers to meet this commitment.

Student's Health, Physical Fitness, and Academic Performance

In 1996, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released the first-ever Surgeon General's report. This seminal report clearly indicates that both health status and quality of life can be improved through physical activity. Although health statistics for children and young adults have not improved since 1996, it is likely that the Surgeon General's report may have initiated a discourse regarding the contributions of physical activity and PE programs on the health status of Americans (Cone, 2004). The report contains a thorough review of research related to physical activity and its impact on a healthful lifestyle (McKenzie & Kahan, 2004). For these reasons, the 1996 release of the Surgeon General's report was critical in recognizing the role and potential of PE programs in addressing the childhood overweight and obesity crisis.

In 2008, the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2008) stated that children and adolescents should participate in 60 min (1 hr) or more of physical activity daily. Schools play an important role in helping to foster lifelong physical activity habits and improving the health of young people by providing quality instruction, programs, and services that promote enjoyable lifelong physical activity. Multiple opportunities exist before, during, and after school to enable students to accumulate at least 60 min of physical activity daily.

A Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program is a multi-component approach for students to be physically active; to meet the recommended amount of physical activity each day; and to develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to be physically active for a lifetime (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). Active Schools is a national initiative that recognizes three distinct components as part of a Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program: First, children are less active than ever. Second, children who are physically active perform better in school. Third, the program seeks to provide positive physical activity experiences for children while integrating physical activity into tasks of daily living. The Active

Schools (n.d.) plan advocates for schools to provide quality PE; classroom-based physical activity opportunities; opportunities for students to be active before and after school; physical activity for staff; and engaged parents and community to help ensure that the school becomes a vehicle for community-wide physical activity.

In 2010, the National Physical Activity Plan revealed the first federal guidelines to address physical activity. One of the plan's education strategies is to "provide access to and opportunities for high-quality, comprehensive physical activity programs, anchored by PE, in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 educational settings. Ensure that the programs are physically active, inclusive, safe, and developmentally and culturally appropriate" (*National Physical Activity Plan*, 2010, p. 14).

Healthy People 2020 (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, n.d.) lists six physical activity objectives designed to increase physical activity through the schools:

- **PA-3:** Increase the proportion of adolescents who meet current federal physical activity guidelines for aerobic physical activity and for muscle-strengthening activity.
- **PA-4:** Increase the proportion of the nation's public and private schools that require daily PE for all students.
- **PA-5:** Increase the proportion of adolescents who participate in daily school PE.
- **PA-6:** Increase regularly scheduled elementary school recess in the United States.
- **PA-7:** Increase the proportion of school districts that require or recommend elementary school recess for an appropriate period of time.
- **PA-10:** Increase the proportion of the nation's public and private schools that provide access to their physical activity spaces and facilities for all persons outside of normal school hours (i.e., before and after the school day, on weekends, and during summer and other vacations).

The Institute of Medicine (IOM, 2011) indicated a need to

help adults increase physical activity and decrease sedentary behavior in young children. Recommendation 3-4: Health and education professionals providing guidance to parents

of young children and those working with young children should be trained in ways to increase children's physical activity and decrease their sedentary behavior, and in how to counsel parents about their children's physical activity. (IOM, 2011, p. 2)

One potential action included "colleges and universities that offer degree programs in child development, early childhood education nutrition, nursing, PE, public health, and medicine requiring content within coursework on how to increase physical activity and decrease sedentary behavior in young children" (IOM, 2011, p. 2).

In May 2013, the IOM released the report *Educating the Student Body*, making six recommendations to address the role of schools in increasing physical activity in youth. One of the six recommendations (#5) specifically addressed colleges and universities. That recommendation stated, "Colleges and universities and continuing education programs should provide preservice training and ongoing professional development opportunities for K–12 classroom and PE teachers to enable them to embrace and promote physical activity across the curriculum" (IOM, 2013, S-9).

PETE programs are largely responsible for the entire research base of knowledge related to PE pedagogy. A growing body of research shows a relationship between physical fitness and academic performance.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010) reviewed 50 studies about school-based PE and physical activity and their effect on academic performance. The review found evidence of improved academic performance; a positive relationship with student attention and concentration and on-task behavior; and improved classroom behavior. A certified PE teacher providing a quality PE program is prepared to design a curriculum and teach children in a way that these benefits can be realized.

Need for Universities to Prepare Future Physical Educators

Increasing physical activity and PE in schools is a common theme in the reports and recommendations over the last few decades. For schools to meet these recommendations, a highly effective physical educator needs to lead this school-wide effort. The goal of

all PETE programs should be to graduate highly competent students who will become effective teachers (Hill & Brodin, 2004). Without PETE-prepared physical educators, the activity needs of students in schools today are likely to go unmet.

Students who are fit and healthy are more ready to learn (Bogden, 2012). However, far too many students go to school in less than optimal health. This reality makes the PE program a vital part of providing students with the knowledge and skills needed not only to be good students but also to enjoy a lifetime of physical activity and good health. A certified PE teacher can effectively lead the charge to increase physical activity in schools. Through the guidance of a certified physical educator, schools can become more effective in increasing physical activity throughout the school day. Classroom teachers can be taught to integrate activity into the teaching of core academic subjects and to cease the practice of withholding activity as a punishment. The PE teacher can also help the school provide quality recess and free-play time by organizing PE equipment to be used by each class. Schools need the certified PE teacher to be an advocate and ensure that students receive maximal opportunity for physical activity throughout the day.

Certified PE teachers matriculate through an accredited program at the undergraduate level. Graduate students in other degrees may choose to become certified to teach through an initial certification process that includes completing their master's degree. The critical goal for PETE programs is to graduate students who are highly competent and have the ability to become effective educators by applying the knowledge of appropriate instruction and student assessment. PETE programs are essential to ensuring highly qualified, certified PE teachers who will provide quality, daily PE and opportunities for lifetime physical activity in schools. PETE programs also provide the most viable path to PE teacher certification.

Many state departments of education have legislation requiring accreditation through an external accrediting body for education programs. Advocates believe that the certification process will develop teachers who are more aware of their own practices (Buday & Kelly, 1996; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2012; Serafini, 2002) and thus more effective educators. The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (n.d.) "advances equity and excellence in educator preparation through evidence-based

accreditation that assures quality and supports continuous improvement to strengthen P–12 student learning” (Mission section, para. 1). The overarching premise of these accreditation bodies is to ensure that PETE programs in higher education are utilizing best practices and that there is alignment with standards set forth by the accrediting body. Usually, these standards attempt to ensure that teacher candidates possess the needed content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. In addition, there is emphasis on candidate’s skills and dispositions, as well as their impact on student learning, all of which must be documented to achieve accreditation or reaccreditation.

Across the United States, enrollments in teacher education are down. In fact, from 2010 to 2012, enrollments in teacher education dropped 11% (Koenig, 2014). Low enrollment was also reported in an informal survey of PETE programs in the United States. Of the programs completing the survey, 61% reported either small decreases or large decreases in their enrollments since 2010 (van der Mars, 2015). The issue of low enrollment has led to PETE program elimination in numerous small and large colleges and universities across the country. SHAPE America and the National Association for Kinesiology in Higher Education (2018) found that, over the last decade, 42% of states had a decrease in PETE and health education teacher education programs. Many of these programs were well-respected teacher education programs in their state or region and some were nationally recognized programs.

In the 2018 joint position statement, SHAPE America and the National Association for Kinesiology in Higher Education stated,

Reduction in and elimination of PE/HETE programs threaten not only the future of physical education and health education teacher certification and research in higher education, but also the availability of qualified physical education and health education teachers to fill shortages in schools. (p. 4)

Faculty in PETE programs need to identify the reasons for the low enrollment and create a plan of action to address the issue.

Reasons for Low Enrollment in PETE

The fact is clear: Student enrollment in PETE programs is declining. It is difficult to state one specific reason for the drop in enrollment across the United States. However, the following are possible reasons: the emergence of unconventional certification/certification by exam, more rigorous entrance and exit assessments, marginalization of PE, changes to the required curriculum in state public schools, changes in PETE programs due to university restructuring, and competition from other kinesiology subdisciplines (i.e., exercise science, athletic training, etc.).

Possible Strategies to Protect PETE Programs

Even with the need for accredited PETE programs to produce effective educators for K–12 schools, many universities face financial exigency issues that require addressing the dilemma of keeping or eliminating various programs. With the future of PETE programs in jeopardy, some programs are reinventing themselves. Here are several examples: universities dropped the undergraduate programs but retained the graduate programs to create a focused recruitment plan, one university dropped their undergraduate program but added the Alternative Master's Degree program, and another university that dropped the program created a wellness and activity endorsement for Elementary Education majors.

Changing programs may be an answer for some universities; however, the bottom line is universities must find ways to recruit and retain quality teacher candidates. Student recruitment is not easy and most PETE faculty are not trained recruiters. This was evident at one prominent university that recently eliminated their PETE program. The faculty at the university attempted several years of recruitment but were not able to increase the numbers high enough to keep the program. SHAPE America and the National Association for Kinesiology in Higher Education in their 2018 joint statement made the following recommendations to PETE programs:

- Educate university admission officers to ensure they have up-to-date information on the demand for physical education and health teachers in their state.

The most important reason that PETE programs should be viable degree programs in colleges and universities is for the health and fitness needs of students in K–12 schools. Quality health and PE programs can be life-changing for today’s youth and, in many cases, already are (Kelso, n.d.). Universities that prepare future physical educators have a vital role in educating those who will equip students with the knowledge and skills to have a healthy body for a healthy mind. Without quality PETE programs, K–12 students across the United States will lose the opportunity to learn how to be skillful and fit for life.

Conclusion

A certified PE teacher prepared by a quality PETE program is critical to the health and well-being of school children and school staff in the United States. Schools are the most logical place to provide children with daily physical activity opportunities and a certified PE specialist is the most qualified person to do so. While universities face financial uncertainties, budget cuts, and program reviews, retaining PETE programs becomes “mission critical” to the health and welfare of all K–12 school children. Educating the whole child is not optional and PETE graduates have the skills and abilities necessary to ensure that K–12 students have both the cognitive ability and the psychomotor ability to participate in a lifetime of physical activity.

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