



Physical Education Without Isolation

Often distanced from other teachers, PE teachers need oversight, validation, and understanding to thrive

By Ingrid L. Johnson and Rachael Chase

According to 2017 statistics from the U.S. Department of Education, the number of teachers leaving the profession within their first five years continues to rise, and those statistics might be even higher for those teaching in

content areas such as art, music, and physical education. Most support structures address the needs of classroom teachers, but PE teachers also need support to encourage them to stay and build careers in education.

Why PE Teachers Leave

There are plenty of nonfinancial reasons PE teachers leave the profession: being overworked, lack of career mobility, physical isolation from other teachers, a lower perceived position in the teacher hierarchy, lack of influence on matters regarding the school, and professional burnout. But lack of support might be one of the most salient reasons.

PE teachers report a lack of understanding and support from colleagues and administration, sometimes claiming this results from their spatial isolation at school and lack of respect from classroom teachers. They often hear colleagues and community members



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express opinions that PE is not a critical part of a child's education, since it consists of things like running and ball-chasing.

Physical educators are often left with little oversight from administrators, conveying the message that if children are busy and happy, quality lessons are being

implemented. The reality is that many new and veteran PE teachers feel isolated and overlooked.

Lending Support

What can principals do to support PE teachers? Here are just a few ideas:


- Adopt inclusive content language in your school; the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is more inclusive than Common Core and explicitly includes physical education.
- Provide dedicated gym/PE space instead of a space shared with a cafeteria or stage.
- Provide an appropriate budget for equipment and technology.
- Offer frequent and appropriate professional development for PE teachers.
- Provide time to collaborate with other PE teachers in the district.
- Tap local university teacher training programs to offer support and mentoring to new PE teachers.
- Cap the number of students in a class the same way you would for a classroom teacher.

To help PE teachers feel less marginalized, you, as a principal, can work to eliminate any perceptions of hierarchy among content areas. Physical education teachers want their subject to be viewed as a valuable component of students' school experience, and providing resources and support equally across content areas reinforces the belief that administrators value all teachers.

Finally, listen to the concerns of the teacher, and find solutions to address them. Ensure that your

PE teacher is included in school-wide discussions, celebrations, and committees. Communicate regularly and clearly with PE teachers about needs for space and equipment. Remember that the gym is their classroom.

A typical classroom has around 30 students. Too many PE classes have more than 50 students, which is neither safe nor beneficial for students; larger classes don't always allow the teacher to deliver quality lessons. Advocating for class sizes that are in line with those of the other teachers in the school demonstrates to the PE teacher that you understand and support their content area, while permitting more individualized learning and instruction and, ultimately, student success.

Many items on the PE teacher's wish list are simple for principals to address, but their impact can be significant. PE teachers are professionals who need support similar to that of the other teachers in your school, but they are often marginalized along with colleagues in other "special" areas. Take the time to show your physical education teacher that you understand, support, and appreciate their work, and you'll be able to boost morale and student learning. 

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