

Advocacy in Action:

TIPS & TECHNIQUES

Coalition Building: Cultivating New Partners for Physical Education

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A coalition is about building power to accomplish change that no one group can reasonably accomplish on its own. A well-defined coalition not only builds power and influence, it broadens support, maximizes resources (e.g., time, money, people and connections), enhances legitimacy, creates synergy, and offers diverse perspectives on issues. Coalitions can be extremely effective.

The general literature on coalition building references “community-based” development and effectiveness factors (i.e., formal rules, membership, leadership, mission, etc). However, coalition building in the legislative context refers to informal partnerships or collaboration of groups who have common interests. These groups coalesce to try to pass or “kill” an issue. In most cases, the coalition disbands once there is resolution of the issue. However, in some instances, the members of the coalition will formalize their partnership to track similar issues in future legislative sessions. Such is the case with a durable coalition that has formed over the issue of physical education in the Florida public schools.

In 2007, Florida moved to mandate physical education in the elementary

schools. At the time, Florida was one of only 15 states with no mandate for elementary school physical education (NASPE, 2006). The Florida Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Dance and Sports (FAHPERDS) partnered with the Florida affiliate of the American Heart Association (AHA) to shepherd the legislation through the session. One of AHA’s priorities was to combat the prevalence of childhood obesity linked to inactivity and the consequent risk of young adults for developing Type-2 diabetes. The issue was the education priority of the Governor in his first year in office.

The Governor’s office took lead on the physical education issue and FAHPERDS and AHA assisted in identifying organizations that could move the initiative forward. The coalition evolved to include other advocacy groups, including the Florida Academy of Family Physicians, Florida Pediatric Society, elementary and middle schools, and sports groups. Advocates for the organizations appeared at committee meetings to support the bills. The elementary school physical education mandate passed the 2007 legislative session.

In 2008, the Governor again took lead

in mandating physical education for middle school as the priority education agenda during his second year. With FAHPERDS and AHA coordinating activities at the legislative level, this year there was a more formal solicitation for groups to sign up to join the coalition. The coalition was comprised of the same organizations as the previous year, with the addition of the Florida Osteopathic Association, other AHA affiliated groups, the Florida School Health Association, local health and other school-based health organizations, representatives from the Florida Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), and the Florida Medical Association. The bill passed with opt-out provisions, which caused chaos statewide in the school districts. The coalition committed to work collectively to remove the waivers to the K-8 physical education mandate the following year.

In 2009, the coalition introduced its own legislation to remove the waivers and was formally joined in the effort by the PTA. Although unsuccessful, coalition partners committed their support and core of lobbyists at the Capitol to move the issue forward. The coalition has reached out to other informal partners

including health insurance advocates and the military readiness units and health promotion programs. The coalition has as a common mission to ensure healthy children through physical education, combating obesity, containing health care costs – all ultimately leading to academic success.

As the economic context has deteriorated both nationally and in the state, it has proven difficult to mandate programs that are considered to have a fiscal impact on an already strained budget. At the same time, other programs considered “non-essential” have been vying for the same dwindling pot of funding. These groups include physical education and health education, music, dance, the performing arts, and student services, among others. These groups have formed their own advocacy coalitions, and have also enjoyed various successes and setbacks. Since there is little budgetary relief anticipated in the near future, it is becoming more evident that, rather than compete with each other for the same resources, it will be crucial for these various groups to begin to coalesce around their goal: preparing the whole child for life success. We anticipate that the current coalition will soon reflect the efforts of all or most of these ‘non-core-subject-area’ groups.

References

National Association for Sport and Physical Education & American Heart Association. (2006). *2006 Shape of the nation report: Status of physical education in the USA*. Reston, VA: National Association for Sport and Physical Education.

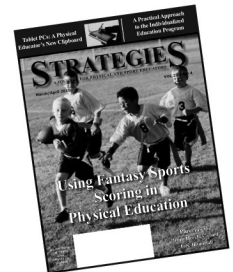
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