

Is Your Class About Something?

Guiding Principles for Physical Education Teachers

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Quality programs need to focus on a purpose, or vision, and guiding principles can help to establish that focus.

In their optimistic treatise on how to address the systemic failures of physical education, Siedentop and Locke (1997) indicated that physical education programs must be about “something.” The particular model, system, or philosophy adopted is less important than making the decision and effort to remain focused on and implement whatever it may be. Vickers (1992) sounded a warning bell to all in physical education when she wondered if we are like Nero who “fiddled while Rome burned.” Lacking a collective vision, goal, or direction for a program is tantamount to having a rudderless ship on a rough sea: we can go full throttle, but we cannot control the direction. Eventually, we will run out of gas and be left adrift, vulnerable to the relentless onslaught of public pressures against physical education.

Teachers often speak to youths about setting goals and striving to achieve them. We tell them to write down these goals and look at them often. We encourage children to develop, early in life, a set of guiding principles—something that provides a foundation for their actions. We tell them that these guiding principles will serve as a starting point, a point of reference, and a place to return to when facing life’s challenges.

This advice is as helpful for teachers as it is for students. Setting goals and developing a sound set of principles will provide a great deal of stability and confidence as educators face teaching challenges. The authors of this article have a simple set of goals and principles that guide them in their efforts to teach. These may not be your goals. They may not suit everyone. However, they work for us, and they have had a positive effect on the students we have taught. Whether you adopt these goals or not, we encourage you to thoughtfully consider your own goals and guiding principles. Doing so will help you to identify that “something” for your program.

Principle 1: Good for Kids

Whatever we do, it must be “good for kids.” This principle encompasses a number of more specific imperatives. Teaching methods should focus on the kids and their needs, not on the teacher’s needs, abilities, likes, and dislikes. If something is good for kids, teachers must learn to do it, and do it well. All activities must inspire kids to be physically active for a lifetime. Teachers should never do anything, or teach any lesson, without first carefully considering how it will affect the motivation of their students. All actions, activities, and teaching methods must motivate kids to do more, never less. Instruction should focus on and accommodate individual differences in interest and ability. Physical education must promote the notion that adopting an active lifestyle is an ongoing process and that this process is our product; it must promote health-enhancing levels of physical activity; and it must promote self-directed learning behaviors, strategies, and accountability in order to develop authentic knowledge,

skills, and dispositions in the kids (National Association for Sport and Physical Education [NASPE], 2004a). A firm but humane approach to discipline should be developed and used. Lessons need to be well managed in a way that encourages maximum activity and achievement. Poorly managed lessons waste the learning time (Pangrazi, 2004).

Principle 2: Goals for Every Lesson

We have three goals for every lesson we teach. On the surface the goals seem to state the obvious. Do not let their simplicity fool you. Underlying these goals is a complex set of theoretical frameworks (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Nickels, 1981; Treasure & Roberts, 1995). A successful lesson meets all three goals—not one or two, but all three. The three goals envision children who (1) are highly active, (2) are highly successful, and (3) have a lot of fun. Let us examine these goals, looking at their intent, their connection to one another, and the supporting theories and principles on which they are based.

We want kids to be highly active. This means two things. First, we want kids moving. We want pink little cheeks, hearts pounding, tired muscles, and sweaty kids as a result of the lesson, so that the students can reap the health benefits of vigorous physical activity. This may involve reevaluating how we structure our activities. For example, we may have to give every kid a ball to eliminate turn-taking, or we may need to shorten our instructions. Second, we want the students to get as many skill-building repetitions as they can in the time available. Refinement of skills through repetition remains a pillar of what we offer students. It leads to greater competence, or a sense of “I can do this!” Because physical education time is short, it is best if we can accomplish both of these purposes at the same time.

We want kids to be highly successful. We want kids to succeed all or most of the time, and we want them to face failure only rarely. This means that we can no longer meet just the needs of the gifted few with a pseudo-athletic experience. We must also accommodate the individual differences that exist among the students. Competence can exist across the spectrum of abilities, and it is equally important to the less skilled as it is to the most skilled. Success breeds passion. To achieve a positive, successful skill-learning experience for everyone, teachers should use instructional methods that allow students to pursue personally meaningful tasks at individually challenging levels. Instruction should result in a track record of successes that build resiliency when the occasional failure occurs. Pacing of instruction should be progressive (i.e., easy to moderate to difficult tasks) in a fast-slow-fast manner. Easy tasks are moved through quickly to avoid boredom. Tasks that are moderately difficult should be taught at a slower pace, because this is likely where most learning will take place. Difficult tasks, once again, should be taught quickly to avoid excessive failure and frustration while still exposing students to higher levels of achievement. As often as possible, individual skills should be practiced before partner and group activities. The



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Every lesson should promote activity, student success, and enjoyment.

early use of repetition and refinement for skill acquisition in individual activities increases the likelihood of success in partner and group activities.

We want kids to have fun. We believe that if your activities cause misery to your students, you deserve every rotten attitude and every bit of whining you get. If your kids are not experiencing the joy of movement, the activity needs to be changed or replaced to enable them to have a good measure of fun. Activities need to catch their interest and keep their interest because they are fun (Henderson, Glancy, & Little, 1999).

Teachers can make students be highly active simply by requiring them to run laps, but this activity would sacrifice the meeting of goals two and three. Running laps, for example, is a comparative activity; someone is always leading, and someone is always in last place. Likewise, teachers can make kids do “on my count” push-ups and sit-ups, but where is the joy in that? Was not the sport-based model first adopted to get away from the militaristic, callisthenic programs of the past? Sport was intended to be fun and to accomplish fitness goals at the same time. Somehow, many physical educators have lost sight of this fact. In many cases, physical education has robbed children of the joy of movement and replaced it with a prescription—a “one size PE fits all” approach. Fitness testing, normative standards, and steady-state exercise have caused educators to ignore the differences in children. The “we know what’s best for you” approach has cost us dearly. “We hate gym!” is an unfortunate and all too common refrain. A current movement toward a physical-activity-based model is an effort to reinfuse physical education with a long overdue shot of fun. Some educators legitimately worry that the pendulum may swing too far, resulting in a lack of learning and accountability. That is why goal one (highly active kids) states very clearly that the development of skills, physical and otherwise, must remain a pillar of what we do for kids.

Principle 3: The Process Is Our Product

Now, let us talk about accountability through assessment. The process-versus-product literature from the late 1970s through the late 1990s showed that the process was of paramount importance (Lee, 2004).

We all want to hold students accountable, but accountable for what? The ultimate success of physical education will be achieved when teachers instill in kids the desire to live a healthy lifestyle when they are adults and provide them with the skills and abilities to successfully do so. Living a healthy lifestyle is a process, it is not something we arrive at, nor a state of being. It is an ongoing process that occurs and reoccurs in the life of each individual.

The time is long overdue for the physical education profession to overcome its fixation on traditional product assessments and accept the notion that the process is our product. Holding kids accountable for the process of getting active, rather than results on a fitness test, will be more effective in the long run. Everyone can succeed at being physically active, and fitness is a byproduct of engaging in physical activity. Therefore, pursuing activity for its innate appeal can result in significant health benefits. But major challenges have emerged as educators attempt to put this process into action. How do we measure the process? What do we measure? How do we turn our measures into grades? Let us examine for a moment the various standards that have been employed over the years.

Norm-referenced Standards. Standards of this kind make comparisons of a student's performance against the performance of his or her peers. Grading on the curve is the classic example of this type of grading. This is done by gathering data on all students' performances and finding the mean and standard deviation. Those who are at the mean receive an average grade, "C," because their performance was indeed average. Those who are one standard deviation above the mean get a "B," and those at two standard deviations above the mean will get an "A." One standard deviation below gets a "D," and two standard deviations below gets an "F." This grading procedure causes peer comparisons that may be (and often are) entirely unrelated to whether or not the desired standard was met. It only tells us how they compared to the group as a whole.

Arbitrary Standards. This refers to someone's best guess at what students ought to achieve. For example, eight out of 10 free throws equals "A," seven out of 10 equals "B," and so on. These are arbitrary; they have no basis in reality. Most often they are unrealistic and set kids up to fail.

Criterion-referenced Standards. These standards use achievement outcomes to which all students are compared. Those achieving the standard receive the "A" grade. Students who achieve less than the standard receive a proportionately lesser grade. When this strategy is combined with assessment of the learning process designed to lead to desired outcomes, you have a process assessment that is criterion referenced. In this manner, all students can succeed by doing the process, demonstrating the achievement of de-

sired outcomes (the product). Criterion-referenced health (CRH) standards, for example, are based on criteria determined "to produce a health benefit or reduce the risk of a specific health problem" (Corbin & Pangrazi, 1992, p. 97).

Normative standards in fitness testing have given way to criterion-based standards such as those in Fitnessgram, Physical Best, and recently the President's Fitness Challenge. Unfortunately, these standards have been received and put into practice most often as a product assessment, instead of an assessment of the process, by equating health-related fitness criteria to a letter grade.

Making the shift toward assessment that reflects the process in which students are engaged will require teachers to examine and perhaps let go of some past practices, in favor of ideas that more closely match desired learning outcomes. For further discussion on how you can assess the quality and quantity of the skill-learning process, see Prusak (2005a).

Principle 4: Choice and Accountability

Fostering classroom environments that support autonomy (choice) has been an effective means of empowering students, resulting in increased ability and motivation to make informed lifestyle choices including physical activity. Unfortunately, the more common practice is to coerce students to pursue teacher-established goals. Thus, student ability to make informed decisions and live with their consequences is at best impeded and at worst, undermined. As we consider the means by which teachers may hold kids accountable in physical education, we must also consider the role that student choice plays. It is our position that these two ideas can be viewed as flip sides of the same coin: you cannot address one without considering the impact of the other. You cannot truly have accountability without students feeling like they have had some degree of input about what is being asked of them, nor can you have choices with no accountability. If there are no consequences to their choices, kids are like water and will seek the path of least resistance. Pagnano and Griffin (2001) have detailed a number of ideas for achieving pedagogically purposeful choice with accountability.

If the ultimate objective, active lifestyles, is to be realized, it will occur because children make the choice to pursue it, even in the absence of the teacher and an educational structure. Corbin (2004) states that there are many "skills," including those of self-management, that can and should be taught in physical education. Perhaps the greater skill is not to make one more lay-up, but the choice to shoot one more lay-up.

Principle 5: Master a Repertoire of Teaching Styles

Greatness is often overlooked because the performer makes the exhibition look so easy that one mistakenly thinks, "Anyone can do that!" This seems especially true for the teaching profession. Those who attempt to teach based on this false assumption soon realize that it takes a great deal of skill to manage and instruct 35 (or more) energetic children in a wide open space with equipment flying overhead.

When teaching looks easy, it is usually due to the timely application of the right strategy at the right time. It is also common to speak of a collection of strategies as a teacher's particular style. Novice teachers are often told that it will take time for them to develop their own teaching style. It is also common in the literature to refer to several teaching strategies as teaching styles. For clarity we will use the term teaching styles for those strategies or schemas identified in the literature (i.e., direct, task, mastery, cooperative, etc.). We refer to the collection of these styles that a teacher may employ as a part of a teaching persona (which includes personality traits, teaching styles, management skills, etc.).

Great teachers are masters of many teaching styles, and they move seamlessly from one style to another throughout the lesson as the situation dictates. For example, a lesson may begin with the direct style but quickly move into the task style as students are engaged in self-directed learning at various stations. Meanwhile, the teacher may work with individuals to provide feedback, or guide others to explore various solutions to the tasks at hand.

Another style, cooperative learning, provides opportunities that offer deeper learning and social skills than other styles and can be used appropriately to accomplish more than isolated assignments. For example, following a series of individual skill-building activities taught in another style, cooperative learning can unite individual abilities into a group or team effort in preparation for team competition.

Sadly, too many novice teachers have received little exposure to the breadth of teaching styles, let alone how and when to use them. As a result, the most common teaching style for new teachers is the direct or command style, often resulting in the potential for early burnout. Further, adopting one teaching style to the exclusion of others severely limits the quality and quantity of learning experiences that students will have. Therefore, if it is good for kids, we must become masters of many teaching styles in order to more fully meet student needs (Mosston & Ashworth, 2002).

Likely Outcomes of Principle-based PETE

Are great teachers born or made? It may seem strange to still be wrestling with this question after centuries of debate, yet recently this very issue was raised and debated at length. As teacher education research continues to increase our understanding of the teaching process, it seems more and more clear that good teaching (including those vaunted intangibles) can be broken down to a

discreet set of skills and abilities...that are: (a) quantifiable (i.e., they can be measured), (b) transferable (i.e., if it can work for one it can work for another), and (c) masterable (i.e., through diligent practice and effort one can master this set of skills).

To think differently calls into question the existence of teacher education programs. If teachers are simply born to teach, why then do we have teacher education programs? Would we not be as well served to line up 1,000 hopeful

teachers and watch them teach? Those who were able to demonstrate that they were indeed born with the gift would be given jobs, and the rest would be encouraged to look elsewhere. Instead, new teachers can learn by watching, practicing, and eventually mastering the skills, styles, personality traits, and other factors that constitute a great teaching persona. To make this happen, we must examine excellence in teaching and find out what the best teachers are doing and why it works. Then the teachers should be taught to incorporate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions into their own teaching personas.

This position validates the notion that most people who strive to be better teachers can succeed if they put forth the effort. This means practicing, much as you would practice a sport skill. If you are not the most positive person, watch those who are, then practice. If you do not smile much, practice. If you are not good at telling stories, practice. If you are not good at disciplining kids in a way that shapes desired behaviors in a kind but firm way, practice. If you are wasting time with sloppy transitions, practice. If you are not good at modeling, practice. If you are not good at giving clear and concise instructions, practice. It will take years to become a master teacher. But we are, after all, in the learning business.

Summary

Some of the principles that guide you may not appear in this article. If so, that is great. Our list of guiding principles is certainly not exhaustive. What is important is the mental exercise of articulating what that "something" is that you stand for in your program and your approach to teaching.

A good place to start when forming one's own set of guiding principles is the pledge for all those aspiring to be "highly qualified" physical education teachers (NASPE, 2004b). This pledge, made in order to create "Positive Physical Education," includes the following items:

- Establish a positive, safe learning environment for all students
- Teach a variety of physical activities that make physical education class enjoyable
- Create maximum opportunities for students of all abilities to be successful
- Promote student honesty, integrity and good sportsmanship
- Guide students into becoming skillful and confident movers
- Facilitate the development and maintenance of physical fitness
- Assist students in setting and achieving personal goals
- Provide specific, constructive feedback to help students master motor skills
- Afford opportunities for students to succeed in cooperative and competitive situations
- Prepare and encourage students to practice skills and be active for a lifetime

This list, the national standards, and a set of guiding principles and personal goals (ours or yours) can give direction for some physical education teachers and perhaps a

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course correction for others. For all teachers, having a set of guiding principles and personal goals will provide focus and vitality to one's daily efforts. Physical education must be about "something," and we must be engaged in the business of achieving that something on behalf of our students.

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