



The Advocate

Summer 2020

Charlie Schultz, Adapted Physical Education Teacher, Portland, OR School District

Garth Tymeson, University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse

Suzanna Dillon, Associate Professor, Texas Woman's University

APE Teachers Advocate to Retain Staff Positions and Services in Portland School District

Similar to all special education and related services personnel, adapted physical education (APE) teachers perform many roles to provide instruction and enhance results for PK-12 students with disabilities (SWD). Teaching, assessment, consulting, and collaborating with IEP team members consume a significant amount of time in the daily lives of APE professionals. Another important role is advocacy, including the always important tasks of informing and educating others regarding APE requirements and desired outcomes for SWD. It should never be assumed that all school administrators and other decision makers are aware of the physical education requirements for SWD and the benefits derived by these IDEA mandated services. This lesson was vividly learned again in the past few weeks in a large urban school district that proposed eliminating all APE teacher positions.

Very recently, a team of dedicated APE teachers in the Portland (OR) School District taught us an effective lesson in advocacy and the power of collaborating with parents and others. The teachers needed to take quick advocacy action to not only save their jobs, but to also preserve specially designed physical education services to the most vulnerable students in the district. The situation started when the administration, as part of a district-wide budget crisis, proposed cutting all 8 full-time itinerant APE positions. These APE teachers serve approximately 550 SWD, ages 5 to 18. APE teachers were not aware of this proposed cut until Wednesday June 10 at 1:00 pm. Once informed, the APE staff took several steps in an attempt to negate this staffing and program elimination. What follows is a list of the action steps:

- When news of the proposed APE cuts broke the team of APE teachers quickly assembled with Portland Association of Teachers (PAT) to better understand the cuts and information they had received from the district. The group developed an action plan and APE staff delegated responsibilities out to each team member to cast the widest net possible. The following is the list of action items:
- APE staff quickly contacted national experts on APE and related IDEA regulations to formulate presentations to administrators and school board members.
- The APE team utilized their "Save APE file" that houses a collection of advocacy materials including a list of local parent advocacy groups, history of cuts in the past, materials that were useful in saving APE from past cuts, copies of schedules of an APE teacher, and lists of disability non-profits such as Special Olympics.
- APE team members were assigned to putting together a packet of speeches and testimonies by team members on APE and its importance for school board members. This packet included photos of modified equipment the team has created, history of the department and APE services in the district, and the physical and social emotional learning (SEL) benefits of APE.



- APE staff wrote a brief email to the Superintendent requesting a meeting directly to make sure he knew what APE was and to inquire about why he was cutting this special education service.
- The APE team wrote a letter to parents to inform them about what was happening. In addition, the team created a template letter for parents who needed assistance with writing advocacy materials. Materials were sent out to all classroom teachers to send to parents.
- APE staff sent an email and made calls to the Oregon APE professional community to share what was happening in Portland and asking for support (i.e., letters, calls, social media presence, etc.).
- The APE team members identified key parents/families to assist with advocacy. These parents have been strong and consistent advocates for their children and APE. Families wrote letters, called the district administration offices, and even emailed state representatives about the cuts and the loss of their child's education rights and services.
- All advocacy materials were translated by an APE team member into Spanish for our Hispanic ESL families.
- The APE team had the PAT union file a grievance against the district for several violations against our contracts.
- APE team members created an online petition stating our case and asking for people to sign and share. This social media effort received over 2,500 signatures in 24 hours.
- We consulted with leaders from all over the state and nation who provided leadership and suggestions. This included the current and past legislative action chairs and Board members of NCPEID who shared additional resources, laws, rules/regulations, OSEP letters of policy clarification, and precedents that had been set about physical education for students with disabilities.
- The APE team had meetings with district PA and TOSA in Health and PE to share our position and our desired outcomes for a unified front for saving PE for ALL students (the district was also facing a 16% cut to elementary PE).
- We met with the President of Oregon SHAPE to discuss how the state organization could help our fight and provide us with a larger voice.
- The APE staff reached out to talk with district GPE teachers and listened to their concerns about the loss of APE staff and services and encouraged them to write letters sharing the lack of training they have and worries over teaching caseloads.
- We used all our personal contacts to connect with key community members to educate them on what happened and the impact of APE on students with disabilities. This important effort included some school board members who mistakenly thought we were stationed at a school they had no clue about our job roles and responsibilities. They also mentioned they did not receive our packet that we sent them in March. So we resubmitted that packet to them.
- The APE team used social media to spread the word and get national involvement. We posted from personal accounts and state and national APE accounts. These posts were tagged to members of the school board and the district. We had a very strong outpouring of support from APE/GPE teachers, families, educators, etc. Many persons were tweeting, emailing, and calling school board members and the superintendent.
- The APE team received a letter within 24 hours of the original announcement of the purposed cuts that all Adapted Physical Educators would be restored for the 2020-21 school year.



Recommendations for Advocating for Your Program

Many important lessons were learned by this incident in Portland. Below are some brief suggestions for continued PK-12 advocacy for APE. We hope these suggestions combined with the actions of the Portland APE teachers can assist others with advocacy readiness.

- Don't wait for the crisis to arise before you advocate for your APE program.
- Be proactive and educate others about the benefits of and requirements for physical education for SWD.
- Invite administrators and other key staff to observe unique units or events that showcase physical education for SWD.
- As always, parents are critical to APE advocacy efforts. Have parents ready to take action if a budget or service cut is proposed. Educate parents about the IDEA requirements for PE and what these services offer SWD regarding health-enhancing physical activity, community integration, lifetime leisure, and active family social interactions. Remind parents to request that physical education services (including goals and objectives and frequency and duration) be present on their child's IEP. Use the saying "Get it on the IEP, and keep it on the IEP" to ensure APE services are appropriately documented and monitored. In addition to parents in your school district, network with local, state and national parent groups. For example, most states have affiliates of the National Down Syndrome Association and National Autism Society. In addition, OSEP funds Parent Education Centers in every state. <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/>
- As an APE teacher, become active on IEP and other special education teams. If not already present, develop a motor team approach or model for services with your OT, PT and other related service professionals. Inform others about your roles, services, and profession so your colleagues will also advocate for you.
- Proactively demonstrate the work and worth of APE. It is important for APE teachers to monitor student progress to show the impact of instructional services. Utilize these data to document progress and the importance of gross motor development and physical fitness as key components to healthy living. Show others how these skills translate to community integration and vocational transition success.
- Have information and materials ready to share with parents and administration if questions arise about budget and position justification. It is very important for APE teachers to know what IDEA includes about physical education and the impact of other IDEA regulations on PE services. Stay updated on letters of policy clarification from the U.S. Department of Education - Office of Special Education Programs and other resources from SHAPE America, National Consortium on Physical Education for Individuals with Disabilities, and other professional organizations.
- If APE teachers in your state don't already come together annually, think about starting a state/regional APE conference. It's very useful for APE professionals to come together and meet to discuss advocacy, learn what's happening in other districts, and provide each other with support. Not everyone has an APE team or is able to attend national conferences. Local or state conferences are a way to build APE community and provide support to smaller districts.
- Stay engaged on social media to connect with other APE professionals from around the country. It's not only a great place to stay up to date on research, adapted games, and modifications, but also to advocate for your programs and students. Social media allows you to reach a wide audience quickly with just a few clicks. You can be engaged with advocacy groups, universities,



professional organizations, and other APE/GPE professionals who can provide you with resources and support.

- Be proactive in making sure your administration (principals, teachers on special assignments, direct supervisors, superintendent, school board) has knowledge of what APE actual is and what your job entails. Stay active in school board meetings through the year and take the opportunities during public comment to share special events, student success, and information directly on APE to promote your services. Use social media to share pictures with school board members and administration for publication in district wide newsletters.
- As an APE team or in collaboration with neighboring APE teams, host Adapted Field Days at the beginning or end of the school year. Invite parents, local news, school board members, and administration to these showcase events. Family fun nights are also a great way to promote your APE program and can be done on a smaller scale. These events are conducted to provide families with a safe and accepting option for entertainment and community. You can team with school clubs or organizations to help obtain volunteers or with advertising the events to promote inclusivity in the community. These events are also convenient times to pass out information on APE to parents and make sure they understand that PE is part of special education.

These efforts will strengthen your position and your programs. For more information, please contact NCPEID.