**TEACHING PE: Breaking Through the Obstacles, Overcoming the Challenges!**

**by Pete Charrette**

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***Life isn’t about waiting for the storm to pass… It’s about learning to dance in the rain.***

This quote by author Vivian Greene speaks truth to me as a 30-year, veteran physical education teacher. I recently “hung up my whistle” and retired from teaching. Although I absolutely loved my time as a physical educator, I certainly had my share of struggles throughout my career. There were many days I felt invincible and others where I felt completely defeated. Most days, however fell somewhere between those emotional points. As I matured as a teacher, I found that I landed somewhere on the good end of that scale way more often, than not. The GREAT thing about teaching for an extended time, is that you are forced to acquire habits, skills and strategies to overcome many of the hardships that come your way.

 What we do in the gym, on the field and in the classroom as physical educators is certainly not an easy task. We are given little prep time, large numbers of students, limited administrative support and difficult students to teach. New PE teachers struggle with the lack of college preparation and finding adequate curriculum to teach. Veteran physical educators struggle with keeping things fresh and coping with “teacher burnout” during their latter years. We can struggle with finding funding outlets for our equipment needs. We also live with the threat that our teaching space will be taken away from us at any given moment. Some of us feel like we “live on an island”, isolated from the rest of the school with little say in what happens even in our own programs. Professional development can be uncommon and getting permission to go off campus to learn new things can be a difficult task. District and state cuts are being made to physical education programs all over the nation despite the overwhelming evidence of how physical movement benefits the holistic development of our children.

With all these obstacles, issues and challenges we as physical education teachers face throughout our career, it is easy for us to become defeated, give in, and throw in the towel. Some take that route and then decide to put minimal effort into what they do and hope to ride out their careers until their retirement date. Others decide to tackle the challenges head on and “dance in the rain” because they feel it is worth the fight to flourish in the storm. They develop strategies to help combat the issues, allowing them to grow as educators and to take their programs to much higher levels. This in turn, helps our profession grow and gives our students the best chance to become physically literate for a lifetime. It is true that your attitude is everything, and how you decide to move forward in your career is ultimately up to you. Which path will you take?

Below I am going to highlight some of the common challenges we as physical education teachers face and provide some practical strategies that can be used to help combat some of the negative outcomes that may result. These strategies may provide you some cover from the rain to help you thrive in the storm!

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

**1. Lack of Support.** The lack of support for your PE program may come from administrators who never come in your gym to see what is going on, or those that will not “let loose” even a penny to be spent on equipment for your students. It may come from classroom teachers that think you are a “babysitting” service and your only purpose is to keep their students so that they can have some planning time. PTA groups or other school entities that exist to fund programs in your schools may not feel that physical education is important enough to support. You might also see a lack of support from the district or state with them holding back funds, providing minimal guiding standards or limited curriculum resources. ​

**Strategies**

* Develop a relationship with your administrative team; invite them into your teaching space often and let them know what you do and why you do it.
* Ask teachers how you can collaborate with them to help connect some of their academic curriculum to what you already do with your students in PE.
* Use physical education and health-related visuals inside and outside your gym that display, teach and advocate what you are about.
* Invite parents to attend classes and/or have community events such as Jump Rope for Heart, Walk America, Family Fitness Fun Nights, Field Day, etc. that pulls the community in to your school and teaching area.
* Make an effort to get to know your PTA or School Foundation to establish a positive, cooperative relationship with them so that they will want to help boost your program.

**2. Lack of Respect.** Physical Education has had a bit of an identity crisis and there have been a number of bad practices rampantly used in programs all around the nation. Much of this lack of respect for our field today exists because there are many parents, teachers, administrators, legislators and community members that had poor PE experiences when they were younger.  These people are now the decision and policy makers at all levels of the education system. Even though there are many stellar PE programs today (at all age levels), we are haunted by our past and by the previous bad practices that are still being repeated today. ​

**Strategies**

* Get involved on your school committees and groups to establish positive relationships with teachers, staff members and school volunteers.
* Develop a school PE web page and/or use a home PE newsletter to let others know what you do in class, providing opportunities for movement at home, delivering pertinent information to parents about school and local movement experiences.
* If your school has a morning news program, make yourself available to highlight events that go on in your gym, give out awards and/or lead school-wide movement segments.
* Use social media to describe, show pictures and/or video the great work that goes on in your class and during your special events.
* Organize before and after school clubs (running, walking, bicycle, fitness, etc.) to give students the opportunity to increase their PE skills and fitness; inviting parents or other community volunteers to help implement the program if possible.

**3. Limited Standards, Outcomes and PE Curriculum.** Some states and districts have outstanding written performance standards that are easy to implement while others lack depth or are not valid. Each district and state is different in what they expect physical education teachers to teach. Some are very clear in their expectations and others are murky. Some districts have supervisors or teacher mentors, but many leave physical education teachers to literally fend for themselves. Some schools, districts and even states hold a PE teacher accountable for their teaching and assessment while others do not. Every situation is unique, but chances are, you have had questions about how and what you are supposed to teach and when you are supposed to teach it.

**Strategies**

* Become involved by helping write on your district/state curriculum or standard development teams.
* If you are not required to use state or district standards, consider using the SHAPE America Standards and their corresponding Grade Level Outcomes, recently developed for all age groups.
* Find a mentor teacher (local or online) and establish a relationship with that person to help you develop a solid yearly plan as well as answering question about your daily lesson planning and implementation.
* Use FREE curriculum plans such as OPEN or ask your district to purchase comprehensive curriculum programs such as SPARK. Use shared lesson activities and plans and/or purchase smaller items to supplement your program from sites such as Teachers Pay Teachers or The PE Specialist.
* Become an active member of the PE Community on Social Media. Twitter (#physed) and Facebook groups such as PE Central and I Tweet Physical Education are great places to start your journey. Outstanding activities, skill stations and games are being shared daily using video, pics and/or written descriptions.

**4. Equipment/Facility Needs-** Regardless of your teaching situation; you probably have equipment or facility needs to accomplish your goals. As an avid #physed Twitter follower, I have seen a huge range of teaching environments from ultra-high-tech indoor facilities to those that only teach outdoors with only “bare bones” equipment and limited playing areas. Some of you teaching physical education now, truly do have critical needs to make your program function. No matter where your program is equipment or facility-wise, it is likely that you will have to take steps to “up your game” and grow your equipment collection to move you and your students to the next level in their development.

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**Strategies**

* Partner with other schools to share equipment throughout the school year. Coordinate when purchasing to allow for the most variety of activities possible.
* Establish a relationship with your PTA and/or other school entities that could possibly give you money to purchase equipment for your daily classes.
* Consider a couple of annual fundraisers (i.e. [Boxtops for Education](https://www.boxtops4education.com/" \t "_blank), Fun Run) to boost your equipment needs.
* If your school or district allows it, use a professional fund-raising organization such as Go Fund Me or Fundly to help raise money to supply you with what you need.
* Use discount stores such as Five Below, the Dollar Store or Walmart for your equipment needs rather than ordering from PE sport catalogs.

**5. Large Class Sizes/Lack of Assistance.** Although this is not an issue for some physical education teachers, it certainly is for many. Double, triple, quadruple or more-sized classes can be the norm for many current PE practitioners. I myself once taught at a school where I had an average class size well over 100 students with 4 to 5 classes coming in at a time. Some of you out there are all by yourself with no help whatsoever and are challenged with figuring out how to provide authentic assessment for large number of students. To truly assess a student correctly, your attention must be focused on that individual student, but you are still in charge of every student in your facility… a HUGE obstacle in our profession.

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**Strategies**

Utilize stations for skill and game development as a teaching option to spread students out and have several activities (related to your unit of study) going on simultaneously.

* Include a number of large group games (i.e. [J.D. Hughes (PE2theMax)](https://pe2themax.com/" \t "_blank)style) that incorporates multiple skills, strategies, movement concepts and outcomes.
* Plan activities that utilize the entire space of your playing area. If there are 2 of you, use indoor and outdoor spaces simultaneously to accomplish your teaching goals.
* Use technology (i.e. timer apps, projection devices) to aid in your instruction. Consider using large group fitness and dance instruction from organizations.
* Incorporate large group fitness movement at the start of class as an instant activity and/or warm-up

such as Go Noodle and or by following pre-made videos from teachers such as Ben Pirillo.

**6. Lack of Professional Development.** Quality professional development requires time and money. Either presenters are paid to come in to a school or district to provide new ideas or teachers have to be given paid leave to meet up and share ideas. Many teachers take time off themselves using personal days and spend their own money to travel to state conventions or workshops to grow as a professional. This is not an easy task as we know teachers are not paid well, and getting quality subs to take your place isn’t always the norm. Personal days are limited each year and travel, accommodations and registration fees are never cheap. Most professional development done in our individual schools is rarely related to what we do as physical educators. Most of it is geared towards raising academic test scores or getting on-board with the newest academic trend.

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**Strategies**

* Consider participating in some summer time professional development such as the [National PE Institute](http://nationalpe.com/" \t "_blank) to acquire new teaching ideas and recharge your batteries.
* Inquire with your district to see if you can meet with or visit other PE teachers from around your area to help share and collaborate.
* Take part in some online professional development from organizations such as SHAPE America, PE Central, ESPEchat or PHYSEDagogy.
* Establish a Social Media (Twitter, Facebook and/or Voxer) presence to help obtain and share outstanding teaching strategies, management tools and movement activities to add to your daily lessons.
* Ask your school PTA or Foundation to help offset the cost of traveling to a state convention or district workshop.

**7. Student Behavior.** The conduct of students has always been and will always be an issue for physical educators. Is it worse now than it used to be? I am not qualified to answer that question however, in my opinion, kids are kids. They never want to feel disrespected and they always want to feel loved. The world our students live in now is different than years past, so the challenge for physical educators is knowing what makes them feel loved and respected. We are also fighting against a society that is generally less physically active now than it has been in the past. It is not always easy to get students to put forth effort to move their bodies when they are not physically active at home. We also see some extremes out there where some of our students are becoming one-sport specialists, with little physically literacy other than the skills represented from the sport their families are engrossed in. Sometimes it seems these types of students’ sportsmanship is less than desirable, and it falls on us to teach them how to handle a variety of game and cooperative situations.

**Strategies**

* Make a genuine effort to know your students. Try to understand what makes them tick and develop strategies to handle their individual behavioral issues.
* Develop a solid behavior plan that does not punish the whole class for the actions of a few. Use a non-threatening stop and think area that allows students to reflect on their mistakes and give them strategies to change their actions.
* Ensure that students are engaged in learning, during your entire lesson, to keep off-task behavior to a minimum.
* Put in place a J.D. Hughes or Ben Landers inspired “Conflict Corner” where students can come together to resolve issues they might have with each other in a calm and structured manner.
* Discuss sportsmanship often and consider it to be a continual part of your daily lesson. Give students the opportunity to shake hands or give a high 5 at the end of every activity or game.
* Incorporate cooperative activities in your curriculum where all students play vital roles in accomplishing group or team goals.

**8. Teacher Burnout.** It is extremely easy to get caught up teaching the same skills, activities, games, sports and concepts year after year. It is easier to do the same things over again from one year to the next. Providing new activities/games and stations requires time, work, effort and sometimes money. Even if you teach differently each year, you are always going to face some of the same issues no matter how you present your material. Poor sportsmanship, tattling, student behavior, technical issues, equipment malfunctions, and being thrown out of your teaching space, will always be a part of the PE teaching experience. You may also come in to work and not know what your gym will look like each day, when other programs move in and out of your teaching space. These types of issues will always push your buttons and strategies will have to be implemented to avoid early burnout.

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**Strategies**

* Make it one of your goals each year to change the lessons in your units or add some new units to your yearly curriculum plan.
* Attempt new things. You can do that from getting resources you find in books, off the internet or from social media tweets and posts.
* Take someone else’s idea and make it your own. You have a unique situation with your teaching environment so add or take things away from what something else has done to make it work better for you.
* Don’t be afraid to come up with something on your own. Be inventive with how you tackle a standard or grade level outcome.
* Let your students come up with some ideas. You might really be surprised what they can make happen! Check out the [Jason Leach’s guest post on this PE Pirate blog](https://www.capnpetespowerpe.com/single-post/2018/02/13/Tapping-into-Student-Creativity-Jason-Leach) for detailed instructions and how to increase student creativity in your classroom.

There is absolutely no doubt that we physical educators face many challenges and obstacles on a daily basis. Everyone’s situation is unique and some of the challenges are much larger for some than others. Several strategies were outlined here in this blog post to help combat these issues but there are many more that can be implemented to change the path of your program and ultimately your career. Keep in mind that change requires effort and it may not come easy.

 Rob Sharma, a Canadian writer, once said that *“Change is hard at first, messy in the middle and gorgeous at the end”.*

 How will you go forward from this day forth…give up and be complacent or “hit it head on”!!! The choice is up to you!

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