

12-2016

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Recommended Citation

Van Otterloo, C. (2016). *Effective Physical Education professional development* (Master's thesis, Northwestern College, Orange City, IA). Retrieved from http://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education_masters/6/

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Effective Physical Education Professional Development

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Abstract

This literature review explores how to create an effective professional development (PD) system for Physical Education (PE) teachers. The review begins by discussing Personal Learning Networks (PLNs), and the impact that they have on professional development. PLNs provide teachers with an opportunity to completely personalize their PD through Twitter, Facebook, and various other blogs. PD in schools is a huge aspect of the professional development process. Allowing time for content specific PD means teachers can analyze strategies and ideas that work for their content areas. Workshops provide teachers with the opportunity to learn from experts and continue to strive to be lifelong learners. They allow teachers to be exposed to new strategies regarding PE and how they can be implemented. Literacy in PE and the ability to collaborate with other content areas is an exciting trend in PD. The ability to hold each other accountable and have different viewpoints helps in the implementation process of new content. The frequency of professional development should be a constant process with teachers striving to better their craft. Providing teachers with specific opportunities can lead to them seeking out their own chances to positively affect their understanding of teaching. All of these components will be identified and shown how they contribute to creating an effective PE professional development plan.

Literature Review

Professional development (PD) is a very important trend in the education world. What is it, why should we as educators care about it, and what does it look like? Physical Education (PE) and the arts have previously been clumped together and an assumption was made that their work would be related. In an interview Dr. Steve Webner, assistant superintendent of Le Mars Community stated, “Content areas must be well versed in content specific teaching strategies in order to carry out the content area standards as intended, and take student learning to higher levels” (2016). Specializing professional development is an exciting trend within the realm of education, and could lead to an improved PD process.

Specifically, PE professional development is an important issue as health and physical activity is being brought back into the forefront of our nation’s focus. As a nation physical fitness has taken a back seat to many other activities resulting in a country trending in the wrong direction regarding health. PE Teachers need to be equipped with strategies and professional development aimed at helping to reverse this trend. It is through PD that Physical Education teachers can learn ways to instill healthy habits to their students. This literature review will discuss the need to revamp the PE professional development process including: Personal Learning Networks (PLN), department PD, workshops, literacy skills found within PE and frequency of PD.

A study conducted by Sarah Westfall of Virginia Tech University, exploring the influence of professional development on four veteran physical education teachers. The study took place over a three-year time period and used a qualitative methodology to investigate change in these teachers. The study found that the subjects changed their minds on topics regarding content, instruction, and assessment. The study shows that PD entices change and

makes teachers evaluate current practices, and these practices can be improved moving forward (Westfall, 2007). The professional development project reported a few substantial findings, the most relevant is what Westfall writes (2007) “teaching is an isolated enterprise, and the social context of this project supported change” (p .2). The information gathered from this study specifically shows the need for professional development and the advantages that can be gained by teachers who welcome these ideas. The social aspect of PD is essential in creating a program that fosters change, ultimately leading to student growth and achievement.

Personal Learning Networks have become a very integral part of the professional development process. This idea of a PLN is no different in regards to physical education. A PLN is a network that is created by the teacher for their own personal use. PLNs are a valuable tool because educators can piece together only the components they need. This 21st century idea, where teachers are in charge of their professional growth. A PLN is mostly created through interaction online via Twitter, Facebook, Blogs, and other social media avenues. Twitter is a social media platform where individuals can post thoughts, links to information, or find valuable information. The ability to connect with colleagues in the PE field across the world gives instant access to a tremendous amount of valuable information (Catapano, 2016). Teachers have the ability to learn firsthand from experts in PE and get up to the minute information regarding the latest trends in education. Brent Town, a principal at Sibley Ocheyedon, (2016) stated in an interview, “It is crucial to work collaboratively with other teachers or districts to better your own teaching or school district. You should always be striving to grow in your profession” (p .3).

It may seem like a daunting task to create a PLN but with a little guidance it can be done by anyone, even those who are unfamiliar with today’s technology. The first step in building a PLN is setting aside 15-20 minutes a day to interact with other educators through Twitter, Blogs,

or other online resources. Instructors will then have the ability to pick and choose topics or content that is relevant to their subject area and begin to find ideas to help them grow professionally (Whitby, 2016). In this short amount of time, teachers will have gained access to information usually reserved for conferences or unavailable to the PE teachers of previous years. There is an overwhelming amount of information available on the internet, and it can be hard to organize without the help of certain internet tools. Websites such as Draggo, a free service to organize and access all your personal links, give the teacher the ability to compile their resources in a user friendly platform. Information and new ideas are always changing and with this style of PD, educators can be on the cutting edge of all things PE. As a PE teacher this is an exciting development allowing teachers to bring relevancy to some of the more outdated PD practices.

Professional development within school districts generally brings groans from most teachers, but it does not have to be that way. Building and district wide PD can be an incredible learning tool used to help maximize teaching potential. For years PE has been coupled with whatever other exploratories did not fit the mold of the core classes, and generally has been viewed as time for “busy” work. In recent history there has been a shift to include more content specific professional development reinvigorating the PE professional development curriculum.

A study conducted by Cohen and Hill (1998) in California, focused on providing content specific professional development to a group of math teachers. Student achievement was then compared and measured by an administered statewide assessment given to students in California. The study found that student achievement was higher in the schools that were presented with the content specific PD than the schools not provided with this style of professional development.

Although these studies are rooted in mathematics, it can be determined that content specific professional development is crucial to improving student achievement.

The simple solution is to allow PE teachers to work together in their own group to help build skills that improve teaching performance. PD opportunities must be rooted in content specific ideas allowing teachers to develop plans that best suit their needs. The ultimate goal of these PD meetings is to have a positive impact on student achievement. In an interview with Adam Michaelson (2016), an elementary PE teacher at Littleton Public Schools in Colorado, he gives insight into their PD, “Our professional development is a group of PE teachers working together to help each other learn different teaching techniques, new games, and how to show growth with our students in PE. It’s also well organized and grade level specific content is discussed and demonstrated at each meeting” (p .1). This particular model shows the importance of providing PE teachers time to collaborate with one another and share ideas of how to maximize time on task. PE teachers are able to focus on teaching strategies that work in the PE classroom. Often times the teaching strategies that are discussed in PD settings, work in a traditional classroom, but they are rendered ineffective in gym or other settings.

Another strategy to reinvigorate PE professional development is setting aside time to have the entire K-12 PE department from the school district meet in a central location. Allowing this to happen allows these teachers to vertically align the entire PE curriculum which not only benefits PE teachers, but greatly benefits the students. Vertical alignment is something that can transform an entire department and maximize student achievement. If PD time is not given to vertically align PE curriculums, schools run the risk of failing to meet the standards set by the Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE). SHAPE is an organization that provides PE educators with national standards, that if met, ensure students a well-rounded PE

experience. There are four key benefits to vertically aligning a PE curriculum; balance, flow, achievement, and communication (Washburn, 2016). Each of these factors improve the educational experience for students and provide them with opportunity for growth. This process allows PE teachers to build upon previously taught skills without repeating activities or interrupting the natural skill progression associated with effective PE curriculums.

A comprehensive study analyzing over 1,300 studies done by R. Bush (1984) revealed valuable information regarding workshops and their effectiveness. These studies were compiled through the usage of interviews and surveys done with a multitude of teachers. The results showed that the only workshops that showed any impact on student achievement were lengthy and required a greater time commitment. One time workshops lasting less than fourteen hours showed no effect on student achievement. Only 10% of the teachers attending these short workshops could actually put into practice the skills that were discussed (Bush, 1984). It is not enough just to send teachers away to a quick one-day workshop and expect implementation to just happen when they return.

Workshops are becoming an integral part of professional development in PE. Teachers are given the opportunity to come together and listen to experts on a particular topic that interests them. They provide PE teachers, especially new teachers, the ability to connect with fellow educators and develop relationships. It is important to make connections and share ideas with PE teachers from other schools and districts. The ability to network and gain resources can be a very valuable asset moving forward in a teaching career.

In addition to making connections, PE teachers are presented with information that is pertinent to their content area and can be implemented. They will then in turn be able to present this new found information to the rest of the PE department at the next professional development

meeting. This approach allows school districts to send teachers to workshops without having to send each teacher and can take turns rotating who goes to these conferences. Teachers are now in the classroom more while still receiving the benefits of attending multiple conferences during the school year. In using this approach, administrators are saving both time and money while still providing employees an opportunity to further their education. School districts must still allow time during contracted hours to provide these individuals an opportunity to share the valuable information. One idea of how to accomplish this task is to provide a substitute for the parties involved which sets aside a 45-minute window to discuss the newly acquired knowledge. This should not be a one-time meeting and school districts need to be deliberate in continuing to allow teachers to share ideas with one another. The more time teachers spend learning new content and putting them into practice, the more the students will receive in new and valuable instruction.

Workshops provide PE teachers an opportunity to further their education and knowledge not only on content but teaching strategies as well. As a teacher encourages students to be lifelong learners, it is important that this behavior is modeled by the educator. Workshops allow teachers to stay relevant with today's ever changing world and do not allow them to become stagnant in what is being taught to their students. LaNice Hill (2012), a presenter at the Illinois Technology Conference, provides this insight, "In order to become a truly great teacher, one must go beyond the textbook and attend workshops and ongoing education courses to truly master the practice" (p .2). In essence, teachers must be willing to practice what they preach to truly provide students with the best learning opportunities.

Although increasing time with PD has shown to positively affect teacher improvement. It is not the only thing to consider in creating an effective professional development program.

Research done by W. Truesdale (2003) reveals valuable information about collaboration and the implementation process of new ideas learned through PD. A study of 50 teachers was conducted where some teachers just attended the PD opportunity, while the other teachers received supplemental help after returning to the classroom. The teachers who worked collaboratively after the professional development implemented the skills they learned quickly into their curriculum. The teachers who were given no extra help quickly lost interest in the new ideas and went back to previous methods of teaching. This study shows the importance of working collaboratively with other teachers to help implement the new teaching skills learned during PD.

Research shows this valuable form of professional development is the idea of two teachers from different content areas working and learning from one another. A great example of this relationship would be an English language arts (ELA) teacher and PE teacher working together to help strengthen literacy skills within the PE program. Literacy skills are something that need to be utilized in a cross-curricular format. Literacy skills will be prevalent in any social setting, career, or educational opportunity. This idea should not escape the PE department and needs to be implemented to help stress the importance of these aforementioned skills. It is an idea that most people would agree with however, we fail to make the connection necessary to effectively put this idea into practice. Professional development should be a time where educators are taught how to incorporate this idea into their specific content area. This does not mean changing the content that PE teachers offer students, but instead how this content is taught. (Alber, 2014)

Literacy skills taught to PE educators in a professional development setting should look different than skills taught to other content areas. The information being covered needs to be relevant and practical to how a PE classroom is run and not just assume that because it works in

other areas it will work in PE. The ability to allow PE teachers and ELA teachers to collaborate with one another during professional development is an exciting idea. ELA teachers would be able to provide PE teachers with strategies and begin a dialogue of how that might work in a PE setting. These ideas could be as simple as allowing students to read rules of games instead of telling them, allowing students to teach one another, or allowing students to read an article and write a response of the benefits of the activity they will be doing. There are a multitude of ways to incorporate literacy skills into the PE curriculum, but it is necessary to allow time for PE teachers and ELA teachers to collaborate and devise a plan of how to accomplish this task.

In turn, PE teachers could provide ELA teachers insight into exercises they could do with their students to increase brain function. A study conducted by the Department of Physiology, School of Medicine, University of Dublin found that cardiovascular exercise increases levels of a brain-derived protein (known as BDNF) in the body, believed to help with decision making, higher thinking, and learning (Breene, 2013). A relationship in which both parties benefit has now been created and in both cases students benefit greatly from this relationship

Twenty studies done by Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, and Shapley of the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) focused on the correlation on number of hours of professional development and student achievement. These studies ranged from K-12 grade levels and covered multiple content areas. Teachers were provided with upwards of 40 hours of professional development training specific to their content areas. Some of the PD training sessions were conducted over a four-week camp in the summer, while other opportunities were spread out over several months. In 18 of the 20 studies teachers saw increases in student achievement and in the other two sections no substantial growth was reported. The varying approaches to how the PD was presented to the teachers could have skewed the results. It would

be great to see if there was any difference between the teachers receiving the PD in a workshop and those that received it periodically over several months. Further research regarding this topic would be greatly encouraged, but it is encouraging with the initial findings that frequency of PD can play a large role in student achievement (Yoon, 2007).

Frequency and commitment are two huge factors when dealing with professional development. An idea known as job-embedded professional development has come to the forefront of the PD discussion in recent years. This idea focuses on providing teachers with approximately 50 hours of PD over a twelve-month time period. The notion goes against the previous idea of PD being held once a month while the students enjoy a two hour early out (Vega, 2015). Instructional coaching is a tremendous example of how to incorporate the hours needed to make professional development valuable. Teachers can specifically identify areas of desired learning and, they now have a partner to help them achieve their goal. It is prompted by the teacher and is done on their own time frame. Instructional coaching is user friendly and provides the teacher with instant access to an expert readily available to help them grow professionally. Teachers are now equipped with new ideas more frequently and can receive more help when needed.

These professional development opportunities do not always need to take place outside of the school day or by attending a workshop. There are plenty of chances for staff to get together and discuss student achievement and strategies to help students. Districts must be willing to allow for common planning periods, or allow teachers to watch other model teachers during the day while the school provides a substitute to cover for one class period. At Le Mars Community they provide a model teacher day to help with this exact idea. Steve Webner (2016), assistant superintendent at Le Mars says, “Schools need more PD during the school day within a PLC

format. Teachers collaboratively identifying what students need to know and be able to do, developing lessons, strategies, and assessments to help students attain and measure learning. They can also be using data to guide future teaching. It is imperative to improve student achievement” (p. 2).

The argument can be made that professional development takes up a lot of time and money that many school districts cannot afford to give. Also even if districts do commit to this practice, teachers will remain unmotivated to engage in the process. Although this might be true in some cases, it makes sense to think about the following question. How are we to expect our students to achieve at a higher level if teachers are not being trained to teach at a higher level?

PE professional development is something that schools need to focus on to ensure our students are receiving valuable skills pertaining to their own physical health. Personal Learning Networks, department PD, literacy skills found within PE, workshops, and frequency of PD all provide teachers with the proper training to reach 21st century youth and begin building healthy habits at a young age. It is important to not disregard the impact that PE has on students and provide teachers with ample opportunities to improve their craft. Teachers must take the initiative to pursue the aforementioned PD possibilities coupled with the district support to put these ideas into action. Although these strategies have PE professional development headed in the right direction, there is still a lot of research that is still needed to uncover what the best PD for Physical Education teachers should look like.

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