



Game Plan

for Physical Education Teachers

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Tips for Physical Education Teachers to Make Classes Inclusive and Respectful for All Students

Physical education is the primary discipline in schools focused on improving the overall health and physical well-being of students and preparing them to choose healthy lifestyles as adults. The physical education curriculum also provides students with opportunities to learn and enjoy a wide range of sport and leisure activities that can improve not only physical health and well-being, but also psychological and social well-being. As a result, it is extremely important for physical education teachers to create and maintain a climate of respect, inclusion and safety for all students, including those who identify or are perceived as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) and those who are gender non-conforming.

Results from GLSEN's 2009 National School Climate Survey indicate that LGBT students are much more likely to be verbally harassed in school than the general population of students. This same research shows that LGBT students are more likely to report being sexually harassed, having their property stolen or deliberately damaged at school, or having rumors or lies told about them at school than their peers in the general population. Students also say that when they report incidents of harassment to school staff, the most common response is a non-response (33.8 percent reported that staff "did nothing"). Finally, students report feeling unsafe in areas of the school that often are not closely supervised by staff, such as locker rooms, bathrooms and areas outside the school building, such as athletic fields.

As an integral part of the school curriculum, it is important that physical education be a safe, respectful and inclusive experience for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. The following suggestions can help physical educators to meet this goal.

Out of Bounds: What to Avoid

Tolerance of Name-Calling, Bullying or Taunting

When teachers ignore disrespectful talk in classes or engage in disrespectful talk themselves, students assume that name-calling, taunting and bullying are an acceptable part of physical education. This creates a climate of disrespect and lays the foundation for bullying to occur. Physical education should promote participation of all students in a positive climate.

Free-for-All Dodgeball Games or Other Activities in which Aggressive Play Toward Others is Allowed

Physical education classes should include games and activities that are inclusive and physically and emotionally safe for everyone. Free-for-all dodgeball or any game or activity in which the strongest, biggest and most aggressive students dominate at the expense of the participation of other students is not an acceptable instructional activity.

Recess games such as “Smear the Queer,” in which students chase and attempt to tackle one student with the ball (the queer) before they can pass the ball off to another student, are also a problem because of the message the name of the game conveys to students: That the “queer” is targeted by other students and that “smearing the queer” is acceptable.

Overemphasis on Competitive Activities and Winning

Competitive activities have an important place in physical education classes, but they should not dominate class activities. When competitive activities are part of the curriculum, winning should be kept in perspective and students should be taught how to be good sports, win or lose. The primary purpose of physical education classes should be skills instruction, with the goal of active participation for all students. When competition and winning become the focus in physical education, some students will quickly find ways to avoid or limit their class participation as protection from embarrassment by, or ridicule from, peers. Some students who do not feel safe skip school entirely on days they are scheduled for physical education class to avoid the locker room and class activities. GLSEN’s 2009 National School Climate Survey shows that LGBT students, compared to the general population of secondary school students, were more than 3 times more likely to have missed classes (29.1 percent vs. 8.0 percent) and more than 4 times more likely to have missed at least one day of school (30.0 percent vs. 6.7 percent) in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

Picking Teams Publicly

Though picking teams has been a long-time practice among children on the playground, this often results in the public humiliation of children who are chosen last. As educators, physical education teachers need to set higher, more educationally sound standards for dividing students for game play or instruction in their classes. The goals of instruction in physical education include:

- Teaching all students sports and fitness skills
- Helping all students learn to enjoy physical activity
- Creating an instructional climate in which all students experience success and positive feelings about participation in physical activities

Picking teams publicly does not meet any of these goals.

Dividing Students by Gender for Instruction or Class Games

Dividing physical education classes by gender for instruction or game play is illegal according to Title IX. Moreover, this practice is based on gender stereotypes that assume that interest in and aptitude for sport participation and performance is linked to gender. By dividing students by gender, these stereotypes are reinforced, rather than challenged. In addition, for transgender students or students who are gender non-conforming, dividing students by gender places them in a position that calls attention to their gender expression or gender identity in ways with which they may not be comfortable.

Unsupervised Locker Rooms

Results from GLSEN’s 2009 National School Climate Survey indicate that two of the three places in schools where students feel least safe are locker rooms and bathrooms (the third is the lunch room). Locker rooms (and the bathrooms in the locker room and the gymnasium area) are among the areas that physical education teachers are responsible for

supervising. When teachers fail to monitor and respond to inappropriate student behavior in locker rooms, they invite incidents of bullying, name-calling, taunting and hazing. If locker rooms and bathrooms are unsafe and unsupervised, not only are teachers responsible for what happens there, but also students who are the targets of bullying or name-calling find ways to avoid physical education in order to protect themselves. In doing so, they miss out on the benefits of participation in physical education classes.

Winning Strategies: What to Do

Designate Your Physical Education Instructional Areas and Locker Rooms as Safe Sports Spaces

Place Safe Sports Space stickers and post Safe Sports Space Rules in instructional areas and in the locker room. Order Safe Sports Space stickers and Safe Sports Space Rules from Changing the Game: The GLSEN Sports Project at <http://sports.glsen.org>

Invite Students to Identify Ways They Can Be Respectful, Cooperative and Helpful with Each Other

Talk with students about what kinds of actions and behaviors are expected in a Safe Sports Space. Invite students to identify what guidelines they would like to add to the Safe Sports Space Rules. Post these additional guidelines in instructional spaces and in the locker rooms. Review them with students at the beginning of each new class unit. Thank students who are respectful, cooperative and helpful. Remind students who are not that they need to act in accordance with class guidelines. Teachers must set the standards and hold students to them.

Intervene to Stop Student Name-Calling, Bullying and Taunting

Call students' attention to the class behavior guidelines whenever someone fails to abide by them. An important goal in physical education is teaching good sports behavior in games or other class instructional activities. It is up to the teacher to create and model a climate of respect for all participants in the class so that everyone can learn and enjoy sport and physical activity skills. When teachers fail to intervene in student name-calling, bullying or taunting, students assume this behavior is acceptable in physical education.

Provide Skills Instruction for Students' Different Ability Levels

Physical education has an unfortunate stereotype as a place where teachers often just "roll out the ball" and watch students play the game without providing adequate instruction. When this happens, only the students who already know how to play enjoy the class. Respectful physical education classes are ones in which all students have instructional time that helps them to gain physical skills, learn game strategies and improve their physical fitness in a positive learning climate. Plan classes so that all students can learn and practice new skills that challenge their levels of ability.

Diversify Curriculum Offerings: Avoid a Curriculum of Team Sports, Team Sports and More Team Sports

Team sports are fun and exciting for many students, but they are only one kind of activity. A physical education curriculum that includes a variety of team and individual sports and competitive and non-competitive activities offers a broad spectrum of activities in which every student has an opportunity to succeed. A varied curriculum invites all students to try new activities and provides all students with opportunities to be successful.

Provide Private Changing Areas in the Girls' and Boys' Locker Rooms

Open changing areas and gang showers that provide no privacy for students in the locker room can make participating in physical education classes an embarrassing and unsafe experience for many students. Some students find ways to opt out of or cut physical education classes altogether because they experience the locker room as an unsafe space. For transgender or gender non-conforming students, the locker room can be a particularly painful place where discomfort with changing clothes in front of peers may intensify feelings of being different. For any student, gender non-conforming or not, feelings of embarrassment or discomfort should not cause them to avoid physical education. Instead, physical education teachers should make sure that girls' and boys' locker rooms and bathrooms provide some private changing and toilet areas for any student who prefers such a space. This can be as simple as providing a curtained-off area in the locker room for changing and providing individual stalls for toilets.

Make Physical Education Clothing Gender-Neutral

Expectations for what students wear in physical education classes should be gender-neutral. For example, shorts or warm-up pants and tee shirts with sports shoes are appropriate for everyone, regardless of gender. By identifying different expectations for girls' and boys' clothing in physical education, gender is unnecessarily highlighted as a significant factor in the class. There is no reason for gendered clothing requirements in physical education, and having them can reinforce gender stereotypes that do not serve either male or female students' best interests. For transgender or gender non-conforming students, in particular, this differentiation can create discomfort that can be avoided with gender-neutral requirements.