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Survival Strategies for Physical Educators During Recessionary Times

Robert C. Schneider, Ferman Konukman, & William F. Stier Jr.

Abstract

Physical education programs throughout the country are feeling the negative effects of what is proving to be the longest and most severe financial crisis in this country since the Great Depression. Potentially negative issues in physical education programs resulting from the current recession include: (a) low workplace morale, (b) the elimination of teaching as well as coaching positions, (c) an increase in physical education class size, and (d) a decline in resources (i.e., equipment and supplies). Physical education teachers must understand the current economic situation they find themselves in and react in an appropriate manner and timely fashion if they are to continue to develop professionally and maintain job security. It is recommended that physical education teachers: (a) remain visibly positive, (b) be versatile in what they can teach (and coach), (c) be able to teach and coach at different levels, (d) demonstrate large class teaching skills, (e) be innovative and flexible in all areas pertaining to their job, and (f) be viewed as competent, professional and innovative teachers by school authorities, parents, students and members of the community.

As the nation's recession continues its devastating impact upon our nation's schools, many physical education programs and teachers are experiencing significant negative fallout. In the San Marcos Unified School district in San Marcos, California, amidst a \$9 million projected budget deficit, 10 elementary physical education teachers were targeted to be laid-off or reassigned for the 2009-10 school year (Ibrahim, 2008). Florida's Charlotte County and Pasco County

school districts are considering a 2% across the board pay reduction for all teachers as well as possible layoffs (retrenchment) if the multi-billion dollar financial crisis continues/deepens in the state of Florida. For the 2009 fiscal year, the Loudoun County School Board in Ashburn, Virginia, approved \$48.7 million in cuts, which resulted in an increase in class sizes and the delaying of the purchase of hand-held computers for physical education teachers (Arseniuk, 2008). These are just three examples of the quick hitting cost cutting measures being considered or actually imposed on physical education programs and teachers in this country.

Assuming the nation's recession will, in fact end, it is nevertheless uncertain when it will actually end. The fact that the recession has been with us for some time and is projected to continue for the foreseeable future, there is a distinct possibility that it will exceed the length of the 1973-75 and 1981-82 recessions (both lasting 16 months), making it the longest recession since the 43 month long Great Depression (Karydakos, 2008). Suffering severe financial setbacks from the current recession are not only many large and small business organizations—but also school districts nationwide. Education, as a state subsidized or supported entity, is experiencing, and will continue to experience, cutbacks from state governments as state tax bases continue to erode. It has become apparent that the staying power of this current recession will continue to have long term negative economic effects on school districts in the months and years to come.

Because of the recession-linked budget restrictions and reductions, school districts are planning both short-and long-term approaches to manage the decrease in available revenue for

educational services (Adler, 2008; Arseniuk, 2008; Borsuk, 2008; Garcia, 2008; Lewis, 2008; Martinez, 2008). Personnel and programs affiliated with school districts – including physical education teachers – will continue to be required to make revenue-related adjustments.

A number of districts have entered into midyear negotiations with their states in an effort to determine how best to meet routine financial obligations and continue paying teachers in light of anticipated financial shortfalls (Vander Ark, 2008). In California, the California Association of School Business Officials warned school districts of impending cuts and told them to expect the worst (Bonnett, 2008). Other states have taken similar steps in an effort to mitigate the fallout from the recession.

Although it is not unusual for districts to have strict guidelines (often imposed by union contracts as well as state mandates) that outline layoff (retrenchment) procedures, some districts have more latitude when it comes to planning for teacher layoffs (reduction in force—RIF). For example, some districts are able to take into account an analysis of school and community needs as well as competency levels of individual teachers and the perceived value of individual offerings/programs. Fischer (2008) pointed out that in some districts teachers with “unsatisfactory” job evaluation ratings are being scheduled for release rather than instituting layoffs on the basis of seniority. It is clear that physical education teachers should be prepared for their schools and districts to be involved in a variety of cost cutting adjustments in the coming months and years.

Some districts have taken a cost cutting approach of *redefining roles* of selected employees to help address the lack of financial resources, specifically, the elimination of teaching responsibilities of administrators as well as a broadening of their supervisory roles. Redefining such roles has allowed for the purging of some administrative positions (Adler, 2008). As teaching responsibilities are eliminated, through

the redefining of roles, those classes formerly taught by administrators are in need of teachers. If teachers are not available, consolidating classes are frequently viewed as a probable option, often resulting in class size increases.

Another possible solution to the school budgetary dilemmas involves *cutting sports* and the resulting *coaching positions* (Nunez, in Garcia, 2008). Such a tactic to save money is a common “knee jerk” reaction to the impending financial squeeze in many school districts. School board members oftentimes support such a move because it allows so-called academic programs to remain relatively unscathed. In light of such reductions in personnel and programs, Sanchez (in Martinez, 2008) believes the more serious consequences of current declining school finances will, in part, significantly reduce both the quality and quantity of physical education programs for the student.

During financially distressed times, cost cutting within organizations takes on many forms, including hiring freezes, layoffs (including “non-rehiring”) and the reduction and/or elimination of programs, activities, and offerings. In terms of *personnel layoffs*, physical education teachers might take note of several factors that frequently are taken into account in deciding who will be laid-off. Typically, seniority, where the “last hired is the first fired,” is used in many (but not all) districts in deciding which teachers are to be laid off. Another common method of deciding whom to retrench, according to Rosenberg (2007), is the performance level and teaching ability (as well as scope) of individual teachers. In reality, some school districts have already reached the point where reducing personnel, including laying-off physical education teachers (for various reasons), has already taken place (Adler, 2008; Lewis, 2008; Martinez, 2008).

In those districts where layoffs can be made based upon reasons other than seniority (that is, if it is legal or permissible within legal and/or union contract parameters), administrators will more than likely consider such factors as production,

workload, and the overall ability and performance of individual teachers. The question then remains, *how can physical education teachers not only retain their jobs, but excel in their positions, while engaged professionally during these fiscally trying times?*

The Need for Effective and Timely Strategies

Throughout these recessionary times it is paramount that physical education teachers become aware of appropriate and timely strategies to retain employment and also prosper while employed. The fact is that the nation's recession has resulted in numerous school district budget crises. These crises have created potentially negative issues for numerous physical education programs and/or teachers. Enacting strategies to enhance performance as well as the attractiveness of retaining one's services as a teacher may not supersede previously negotiated employment contracts that speak to reduction in force (RIF) issues but, overall, may help secure one's position. In general, when all else is equal, the better performing teachers, *those who are viewed as indispensable or highly regarded employees*, should experience long-term job security. This article will provide strategies for the currently employed physical education teacher to effectively persevere through this difficult recessionary period.

Issues and Recommendations

Five recession related issues that have the potential to negatively affect physical education programs and activities as well as teachers are listed below. Each issue is followed by strategies that physical education teachers might use to help address the issue. Making use of one or more of these strategies may assist physical education teachers as they attempt to develop professionally while maintaining their teaching positions during the current economic downturn.

1. Issue: Negativity and low workplace morale. Under declining budgetary conditions, changes

often take place that can lead to negativity in the workplace and low workplace morale. As budgets are decreased, less money will continue to be available for many areas, including staffing and other resources/assets. With inadequate staffing and limited resources, teachers who currently hold physical education positions will inevitably be asked to assume more work related responsibilities, oftentimes without adequate or any additional compensation. The initial resentment felt by physical education teachers who are asked to assume additional work for inadequate or no compensation may be followed by various degrees of burnout, which can lead in turn to individual negativity and overall low workplace morale. This low morale can be infectious, affecting other members of the faculty, and trickling down to the students and even their parents.

Strategies for the Physical Education Teacher: Few things are more capable of creating a negative workplace environment than lack of adequate revenue within a department. Although dire financial conditions may be the root of many negative employment environments, physical education teachers can, however, choose whether they are going to reinforce negative work environments with their own personal negativity. In tough financial times teachers should deliberately choose to behave in an even more *visibly positive* manner even though a less than desirable work environment exists. This attitude carried by physical education teachers can be a deliberate choice. Some may choose to allow the impact of the financial crisis (and the different workplace rules/expectations) to bring out or exacerbate an already existing negative attitude. However, others may consciously exercise their choice to remain positive and upbeat throughout the financial crisis, and to be viewed by their colleagues and administrators as a positive and contributing force within the department and the school.

Ultimately, it will be the collective attitudes of individual employees that will create the overall

tone of the workplace environment. Physical education teachers who choose to remain positive and upbeat during difficult times contribute to workplace morale in a most positive manner. Choi (2006) pointed out that employees with positive attitudes are more likely to cooperate with and help others in the organization. It stands to reason that school districts and administrators would prefer employees/teachers who carry positive attitudes at the workplace over those who do not. And, the reality of the matter is, not all teachers in all subjects or at all levels exhibit such positive attitudes. The key is to be viewed by school administrators and the school board as part of the solution, rather than part of the problem—during both good times and bad times.

2. *Issue: Eliminating teaching and coaching positions.* The elimination of both full and part-time teaching and coaching positions is an obvious cost cutting measure available to administrators and school boards. In the event that full-time positions are eliminated and the school district plans on retaining the same academic and/or sports programs, the job responsibilities of the eliminated positions must somehow be “covered.” One administrative option is to reassign the teaching and coaching responsibilities to other physical education teachers currently employed in the department—as well as to other teachers in the school or district. The reassignments may not include additional or adequate compensation. An increase in teacher workloads without an increase in pay is a realistic cost cutting measure during difficult financial times, unless prohibited by union contract, school rules, or State mandates.

Many sports have head and assistant coaches. In cost cutting moves, some districts look to the elimination of part-time assistant coaching personnel leaving the total coaching responsibilities to the lone head coach. In this eventuality, vacant assistant coaching positions may either be filled by other full-time teachers or not replaced at all. Currently employed physical education teachers (who do not coach but are

qualified to) may be called on to assist in filling positions left open by the elimination of part-time coaches.

Strategies for Physical Education Teachers: Be versatile. From not only a professional development perspective, but also for self-preservation reasons, teachers need to be versatile, which means being able to serve in any number of ways. During difficult budget times physical education teachers should be ready to take on multiple roles, including additional teaching as well as coaching assignments. Physical education teachers who are also head coaches, and who have lost their assistants, should be willing to carry on without assistants while maintaining a quality learning experience for the youngsters.

Physical education teachers who have a variety of teaching *and* coaching skills will be well suited to step in and fill coaching positions vacated by layoffs. Those teachers who can teach numerous content areas within physical education *and* can coach different sports at different levels will be viewed as highly desirable/valuable by school districts during these recessionary times. In terms of coaching, physical education teachers should be willing and capable of coaching “. . . *more than one sport, preferably three sports, in three different seasons*” (Stier, 2009, p. 544). They should also be capable of coaching at different levels of competition. Given the similarities between teaching physical education and coaching, full-time physical education teachers will often be likely choices to fill coaching positions vacated by part-time physical education teachers and coaches (Stier, 2009).

Physical education teachers who possess a wide range of skill sets will be more secure and sought after than those whose skill sets are limited. In these recessionary times, a generalist or person with a broad skill set will be more of an asset than a specialist or someone who has a limited skill set. The teacher who can and is willing to teach various grade levels, coach various sports, and perhaps assume some administrative responsibilities is more valuable to a district than

the teacher whose professional abilities, interests, competencies, and skills are limited.

As physical education teachers put broad skill sets to work through the addition of teaching *and* coaching responsibilities to their workload, they will have to become efficient and focused time managers. As workloads increase, the multi-tasking and time management skills of physical education teachers will be tested. O'Donovan (2006) recognized the importance of educators making time management a priority through behavioral changes beginning with "taking the time to manage time," then defining a focus and clarifying tasks. Mastery of subject matter knowledge and sport content knowledge should allow for efficiency in preparation time. If physical education teachers have mastery knowledge of their teaching and coaching areas, less time will be needed to plan and organize lessons, and practices. Becoming more efficient in learning how to accomplish more with less (efficiently combined with effectiveness) will continue to be a highly valuable asset of physical education teachers throughout these difficult recessionary times.

3. Issue: Increase in physical education class sizes. It has been pointed out in the literature that class size increases as a result of school district budget deficits (Adler, 2008; Arseniuk, 2008; Martinez, 2008). Whether it is through hiring freezes or layoffs, when budget deficits prevent adequate staffing, class sizes predictably increase. Another factor that often increases class sizes (if no new classes are created) is the general enrollment increase that normally takes place in many communities irrespective of teacher layoffs and hiring freezes.

Strategies for Physical Education Teachers: Despite large class sizes, the challenge of meeting the needs of students must still be met by the teachers who are fortunate enough to retain their teaching positions during this recession. As budgets decrease or remain static, physical education teachers will have to confront the issues that come with large classes. Hastie, Sanders and

Rowland (1999) found that large class sizes in physical education present numerous problems including: (a) difficulties in achieving high standards, (b) insufficient physical space, (c) lack of adequate equipment and supplies, (d) limitations in personal teaching styles, (e) class management challenges, and (f) a concern for increased accidents and injuries in class. Efficient class management and effective organizational skills on the part of the physical education teacher must be improved to be effective teachers of large classes. Most challenges or problems encountered in small classes are magnified in large classes. Since weaknesses in teaching are often more readily exposed in large classes than small classes it is important to develop and exhibit superior teaching strategies, techniques, and methods in classes of all sizes, but especially large classes. And, since communication skills, rapport with students, knowledge of subject matter, and appropriate teaching methods are all of great concern in large classes, it behooves the physical education teacher to demonstrate excellent communication skills and to develop positive rapport with students, parents, colleagues and administrators.

To maintain teaching effectiveness, when class enrollments double and triple to the point where as many as 60-75 or more students may be in a single class, physical education teachers must be open minded to teach such large classes and to implement a variety of appropriate and effective teaching methods and to be efficient in their implementation. Those physical education teachers who are willing and effective teachers of large classes will be more indispensable to districts than those who do not have large class teaching skills.

4. Issue: Eliminating administrators who hold dual teaching and administrative responsibilities. Some districts' employees who hold dual administrative and teaching roles may be laid off in financially challenged times, leaving unfilled teaching *and* administrative responsibilities. Some of the vacated teaching responsibilities may

remain unfilled while others must be assumed by current teaching staff. Some of these unfilled administrative responsibilities may need to be assumed by the remaining teachers who only teach while holding dual teaching *and* administrative licensure and certification.

Strategies for Physical Education Teachers: Current physical education teachers should be prepared to assume assignments that remain, following the elimination of selected dual teaching/administrative positions. Accepting additional teaching and administrative assignments might call for versatility in a wide variety of content areas. Being able to teach across several different content areas (physical education as well as other academic areas) as well as assume administrative positions (by possessing administrative license/certification) will enhance the job security of currently employed physical education teachers. Being able to teach more than a single subject field (being dual certified) is a great asset to a teacher and is highly prized by many school districts (Stier, 1994).

5. *Decline in physical education resources.* Under conditions of declining budgets, spending less on resources such as equipment and supplies is a common cost cutting strategy. Inadequate resources can make for adverse and challenging teaching situations.

Strategies for Physical Education Teachers: Be innovative, flexible, and persuasive. During distressed budget conditions, physical education teachers have to rely on their innovative and creativity skills to create stimulating class environments in situations where there are no longer state-of-the-art equipment and supplies to stimulate students. Physical education teachers must take a flexible and innovative approach to teaching because of constantly changing work environments as a result of budget cuts caused by the recession. Cost cutting measures taken by administrators will be on-going in reaction to the nation's ever challenging economic situation. Being flexible and innovative (and being known as a flexible and innovative teacher) in working

within a teaching environment in spite of inadequate resources will be most helpful to physical education teachers.

As resources decline, physical education teachers must have the ability to "sell" their product to students. Despite no longer having state-of-the-art equipment, supplies and facilities, physical education teachers must call on their persuasive abilities to maintain student interest in course objectives. Under adverse conditions, fostering a positive, energized environment can be very helpful in enabling teachers to maintain and increase the interest level of their students. And, being persuasive in conveying this ability to school administrators is likewise most important. The objective is to make school administrators aware of one's competencies, skills, and abilities (and willingness to "go the extra mile") in terms of teaching and "making do" with less than the ideal resources in terms of facilities, equipment, and supplies. Perceptions are often as important as reality, and physical educators should make a conscious effort to be perceived as highly competent by others.

Physical education teachers should prepare to meet high objectives with less than ample resources without being discouraged by the difficulties of the existing conditions. There is an old adage in education which states: *Anyone can be successful if one has all of the tools and assets that one would want—but it takes a truly competent professional to accomplish the objectives with less than adequate resources/assets* (Stier, 2008).

Strategies Helpful for Current and Future Physical Education Teachers: The strategies offered in this article are sound recommendations for professional physical education teachers, regardless of the financial circumstances surrounding the school districts in which they are employed. Regardless of the level at which one teaches (K-12), during both adequately funded times, as well as distressed financial times, the recommendations presented herein may serve the critical function of protecting physical education

teachers from arbitrary and capricious reduction in force (RIF) measures taken by school administrators. Additionally, these strategies can also benefit future physical educators who will be seeking a job teaching physical education in these challenging days.

Summary

Physical education teachers should not be surprised when they are assigned increased workloads to compensate for understaffed physical education programs brought about by severe financial problems and challenges. As a result, flexibility, innovation, and persuasiveness will serve physical education teachers well during the school district budget crisis that will exist in many districts for some time to come. Without adequate funding and resources, physical education teachers must rely on their creative skills and be effective advocates of their changing roles to students, administrators, school boards and the general community.

Physical education teachers must maintain a positive attitude and remain enthusiastic even under the most financially distressed conditions. They must be effective promoters and advocates of themselves and their programs to school administrators. Administrators will notice and appreciate physical education teachers who are pleasant when working conditions decline. Holding a wide range of physical education and related areas skill sets will also benefit physical education teachers during these times of financial strife. At various levels, physical education teachers should be able to effectively teach across different content areas and coach different sports, at different levels. In addition, as physical education classes increase in size, it is important that physical education teachers be viewed as effective teachers of large classes.

It is imperative that during this current recessionary period, physical education teachers make themselves *as indispensable as possible* to their school districts, schools, departments, and

communities. In addition, and most important, school authorities *must recognize* the invaluable current and future contributions that the individual physical education teacher is making and will continue to make. In the short term, adhering to the recommendations in this article will assist physical education teachers as they attempt to retain their current position. In the long-term, after the recession finally hits bottom and, hopefully, begins its recovery stage, physical education teachers will be better equipped to continue in their jobs and to further excel in their profession of teaching and, when appropriate, coaching.

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