



# The Shoes Make A DIFFERENCE

By Dennis M. Docheff, Carly Wright and Rachael Chase

**O**n a beautiful, brisk spring morning in Washington, D.C., a large group of people poses for a picture in front of the imposing U.S. Capitol building. At first glance, an outsider might see the well-dressed crowd of people as a typical oversized group of sightseers at the Nation's Capital. However, with a second glance, the viewer notices something different—they are all wearing colorful sneakers! SPEAK Out! Day is underway, and in just a few moments, the more than 200 members of SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators will descend on Capitol Hill to advocate for quality health and physical education. The purpose of this article is to describe SPEAK Out! Day and address a few of its practices and outcomes, as well as the enjoyment participants experience by volunteering for this event.



**SHAPE America members from Connecticut descend on Washington, D.C. for SPEAK Out! Day.**

## Why SPEAK Out!?

SPEAK Out! Day is an annual event in which SHAPE America members converge in Washington, D.C. to meet with representatives and senators to discuss issues related to quality health and physical education (SHAPE America, n.d.). Members attend meetings with Congress representatives based on a schedule developed by the SHAPE America staff. It is a volunteer event unlike any other for SHAPE America. Members give of their time, energy and personal finances to put their best foot forward for the well-being of all children nationwide. Over the years, member participation in SPEAK Out! Day has grown. According to figures provided by SHAPE America, in 2007 approximately 60 attendees from 23 states participated in SPEAK Out! Day. In 2018, SPEAK Out! Day had grown to include over 215 participants, with 45 states represented. SPEAK Out! Day is in its 12th year in 2019; hopefully, it will continue to grow each year. The goal is to have each state represented in order to meet and influence as many members of Congress as possible during the event.

SPEAK Out! Day originated after the passage and implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and its unintended negative consequences for school health and physical education (Klein, 2015). The exclusion of both physical education and health from NCLB resulted in the cutting of programs, a reduction in funding, the elimination of physical education and health teacher positions, and the marginalization of health and physical education programs across the country.

A strong voice for advocacy was needed if physical and health education were going to be included in federal education re-authorization, and if the Carol M. White Physical Education Program grant funding was to be retained. SHAPE America adjusted its priorities as a national organization, recognizing its duty as the voice of the profession. It has taken a number of years to develop the organization's advocacy leadership role, to develop relationships with members of Congress, and to raise the expectation for SHAPE America members to become advocates, but SHAPE America and its members have secured a firm hold in the health and physical education advocacy world.

During each session of Congress, SHAPE America staff re-evaluate congressional members who have supported quality health and physical education in the past. They also examine the implications of the current presidential administration, note which legislators have retired, explore opportunities with new members of Congress, and assess any changes in the congressional committee membership of those who oversee education issues. Originally, SHAPE America advocated for quality health education and physical education in a general manner. Based on ongoing needs assessments performed by the SHAPE America staff, member advocacy became more specific, seeking support for the PHYSICAL Act—legislation championed by SHAPE America that proposed to designate health and physical education as core academic subjects in federal education law. Yet another year, SHAPE America volunteers were advocating



for the inclusion of health and physical education in the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), where health and physical education were, in fact, included among the subjects listed to define a well-rounded education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). It is the opinion of these authors that SPEAK Out! Day was instrumental in the passing of ESSA. For the first time in history, our government recognized physical education and health as meaningful parts of a comprehensive, whole-child education. Now, the focus is to enhance the allocated funding for ESSA. The “asks” may change from year to year, but the need for advocacy continues to exist.

## Preparing for SPEAK Out! Day

SHAPE America provides its members with an in-service training during the afternoon preceding the SPEAK Out! Day event in order to prepare volunteers for their day on the Hill. The training has evolved over the years. In preparing for the in-service training, SHAPE America researches and reviews the pulse of the many legislative changes, as things are constantly evolving on Capitol Hill. The SHAPE America staff spend the time necessary to perform an in-depth study of the current issues to provide the attending members with the necessary context. What exactly are the advocates going to talk about when they make their visits to Congress members? What is the best way to approach legislators about supporting health and physical education? What are their “asks” going to be? What are the key words and phrases we want to leave in the minds of legislators? These questions make up the content of the pre-event training session. In addition, the SHAPE America staff at-

tempts to prepare attendees for any pushback they may receive in their meetings on the Hill. This is not a “just show up and walk the halls of Congress” kind of event. Volunteers learn the process of advocacy prior to approaching the Hill. Participants receive an overview of all materials and the meeting schedules for the day, and have a chance to participate in some role-playing. Practice matters!

Putting together the training for SPEAK Out! Day is not an easy task. SHAPE America provides a webinar a few weeks before the event to motivate attendees to start thinking about SPEAK Out! Day. The webinar is an introduction to the advocacy process; it informs SHAPE America members on what the meetings will look like, and encourages them to start developing their stories to share in their meetings. Personal stories related to health and physical education programs are critical to the meetings with Congress. Stories about enhanced student academic performance, improved behavior in schools, reduced risk behaviors among students, and much more are shared. These stories bring the message, research and data to life, and help Congress make a stronger connection with their home state or district.

In recent years, the training sessions have risen to the next level by providing attendees with guidance and training about what to do when they go home. It is critical to address how to develop relationships with decision makers over time, so SPEAK Out! Day can extend beyond the one-day advocacy event. SHAPE America wants attendees to understand the relationship between federal law and state- and local-level implementation of the law. The training session helps attendees make those connections and take a leadership role in their



**SPEAK Out! Day attendees show off their neon sneakers prior to their meetings with Congress.**



### **SPEAK Out! Day attendees show their sneakers while on Capitol Hill.**

process. Each year, the training provides participants with both the content of the work, as well as the methods or procedures to best convince legislators to support the cause. Gaining an understanding of the legislative process is an added bonus of the entire experience. Although people may go out for a nice dinner and see some of the sights, most people hurry back to their hotel room in order to “study up” for the next day’s task. SPEAK Out! Day is not a vacation—it is an event where learning occurs. Volunteers gain a stronger understanding of current issues affecting health and physical education, as well as of the process of advocacy.

### **SPEAK Out! Day Activities and Events**

The morning following the training session comes quickly. Some attendees get up at 5:00 a.m. in order to do some last-minute studying, prepare for the day, grab some breakfast, or go for a quick bout of exercise. People’s passion is evident as participants gather outside in the crisp Washington, D.C. air, waiting for the bus that will take them to their appointments. The appointments are set up by creating a large master spreadsheet with all registered SPEAK Out! Day attendees and their three members of Congress (two senators and one congressperson). SHAPE America staff reach out to the scheduler in each of the congressional offices to request a meeting. Although it is a logistical challenge to go back and forth with hundreds of offices, each year a schedule is created that works for everyone. An attempt is made to keep state delegations of SHAPE America

home states after the event; some volunteers provide this valuable information through their state SHAPE organizations.

The SHAPE America staff does its best to relieve any concerns of attendees, so they feel prepared and knowledgeable about the issues that will be discussed. This is comforting because many people naturally think they need to be an expert in federal education law to practice advocacy, but nothing could be further from the truth. Those interested in SPEAK Out! Day need only be experts in their own programs and their own students. SHAPE America Director of Public Policy & Advocacy, Carly Wright, knows the advocacy business and translates the complexity of legislation and the legislative process for the attendees so they can easily understand the what, why and how of the advocacy

members together, so they are able to support each other in their meetings. The SHAPE America staff ensures that no one goes to a meeting alone and that all attendees have a full day of meetings. The last-minute nature of the scheduling process, due to congressional office schedules often being fluid until just a few weeks prior to the event, makes for an intensive rush to the finish line.

As people travel across the Hill, walking from office buildings for the representatives to buildings for the senators, professional friendship bonds become stronger. In the middle of the SPEAK Out! Day experience, lunch is provided for all the participants. During the time allocated for lunch, gathering 200-plus people who are working toward a shared cause creates another opportunity to bond. A few select congressional representatives (or their staff) are invited to attend the lunch to receive acknowledgment for their support of health and physical education programs. Advocates share some of their morning experiences with one another. After resting and refueling, everyone takes off for their afternoon meetings.

### **The Colorful Sneakers**

The wearing of sneakers for this event began when one of the SPEAK Out! Day participants from Colorado forgot his dress shoes; instead of going out to buy new dress shoes, he wore his running shoes with his suit. The following year the entire contingent from Colorado wore neon sneakers—and people took notice! In the halls of Congress, the visitors in a business suit and sneakers were identified as advocates for physical education and health. SHAPE America liked the idea and encouraged all attendees to start wearing their sneakers.

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The following year, members began to post pictures on social media of the shoes they planned to wear for the next SPEAK Out! Day event. Clayton Ellis, one of the few people who has attended every SPEAK Out! Day, claimed that the shoes do make a difference (personal communication, June 29, 2018). To some, it is almost comical to see these passionate advocates dress up to meet their senators and representatives in business attire while donning athletic shoes. Typically, participants travel back and forth between the Senate buildings and the House buildings, sometimes two or three times throughout the day. The sneakers are more comfortable for this full day of walking in Washington, D.C., but, more importantly, they have become a symbol of physical activity to members of Congress and their staff and help identify this group of advocates who are passionate about their work. Carly Wright has stated, "It [wearing the shoes] helps us stand out on Capitol Hill from all other advocacy groups; it's a great icebreaker for a conversation. It makes us memorable to staffers and members of Congress." In fact, some legislators and their staff change into their own running shoes when SPEAK Out! Day meetings are on the day's agenda.

## Benefits and Accomplishments of SPEAK Out! Day

Roger Jackson, another active SHAPE America member who has attended every SPEAK Out! Day event, expressed

that relationship building is one of the great benefits of taking part in the event (personal communication, June 20, 2017). The SHAPE America advocates build relationships with their representatives and senators, but the professional and personal relationships built among the SHAPE America members who attend is also important. Jackson stated, "The contacts we have made and cultivate with one another are priceless." Stopping for a few pictures along the way, volunteers from across the country forge lifelong friendships and memories.

One of the first students to attend SPEAK Out! Day was Rachael Chase, an undergraduate student at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, MI. Chase made the claim that SPEAK Out! Day provided her with an amazing group of role models. She said, "This event draws the strongest, proudest and most dedicated teachers. It makes me feel proud to be associated with [these professionals] and consider them close mentors after just a couple of days" (personal communication, July 18, 2017).

A key accomplishment of SPEAK Out! Day has been to secure the inclusion of health and physical education as part of a well-rounded education in federal education law for the first time. This was monumental for the profession and for children, yet the work is not over. SHAPE America members need to continue to push for additional federal support and the necessary funding to implement effective programs in schools.

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2017 SPEAK Out! Day attendees  
in front of Capitol Hill.



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a huge impact on those who attend. Attendees have an opportunity to engage in meaningful advocacy and get a valuable professional development experience. SHAPE America has made much progress in educating its members about their role in the advocacy process at the federal, state and local levels, and how critical it is to be actively engaged. Some participants use their experience to mentor others, while a number of members have organized their own SPEAK Out! Day in their home state and local communities. Initiating a state-level SPEAK Out! Day is the result of internalizing the national experience and turning it into a meaningful local opportunity.

When asked about the greatest outcome of the *SPEAK Out Day* experience, Carly Wright stated,

It is really my favorite two days of the year. The people who attend are the most passionate advocates in our profession and are 100% the reason I do what I do. I am energized by their passion and want to do whatever I can to support their efforts. ... Helping our members navigate the legislative process in a meaningful way and seeing the light bulbs go off is wonderful. I have seen members turn into true advocacy leaders in the field as a result of their engagement in SPEAK Out! Day. (Personal communication, February 23, 2018.)

## Concluding Thoughts

SPEAK Out! Day participants walk away feeling accomplished, proud and empowered; they make a difference for not

only the profession but for children across the country. What the volunteer advocates do is no small task, and it leaves a lasting imprint on federal education law. A meaningful takeaway for those able to attend SPEAK Out! Day is learning that advocacy is not as scary as it sounds. One goal is to have SPEAK Out! Day participants feel that they have developed the skills necessary to continue to be an advocate and a champion for health and physical education. Whether speaking to a colleague, parent or a local lawmaker, advocacy skills are necessary everywhere. As the SPEAK Out! Day event unfolds, friends become partners in advocacy; colleagues become collaborators; people rely on each other to advocate for their cause. Participants in the SPEAK Out! Day experience have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the political process, while moving about some of our country's treasured monuments in Washington, D.C. Once the afternoon concludes, many of the volunteers hustle off to the airport to get back home because many of them have to teach the following morning.

As people arrive home, many put their neon sneakers back in the closet until the next SPEAK Out! Day. Those sneakers are more than footwear. They stand for movement and physical activity. They represent many hours of work in furthering the cause of what has become 50 Million Strong—SHAPE America's ongoing initiative to put all children on the path to health and physical literacy through effective health and physical education programs (visit [50million.shapeamerica.org/about-us](https://www.50million.shapeamerica.org/about-us)). The sneakers are a symbol; they stand for the happiness, health and quality of life of our nation's children. So, when you see passionate health and physical educators moving about in their business attire and sneakers on the Hill, remember this: it's not just about the shoes, but the shoes really do make a difference.

## References

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*Dennis M. Docheff (docheff@ucmo.edu) is a professor in the School of Teaching & Learning at the University of Central Missouri in Warrensburg, MO; Carly Wright is the director of public policy & advocacy at SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, in Reston, VA; and Rachael Chase is a student at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, MI.*