As the seasons and the weather patterns shift throughout the year, opportunities emerge for holding physical education class outdoors. For some, the winter and early spring are the seasons best suited for outdoor physical education, whereas, for other teachers, the early fall and late spring provide the best climate for outdoor physical education. The purpose of this article is to provide strategies for teaching physical education outside—specifically, safety considerations, classroom management protocols, and lesson selection.

Safety
As with all physical education classes, student and teacher safety is essential to creating an effective learning environment. Two elements to consider when planning outdoor physical education are the weather and the condition of the playing surface(s).

While current weather conditions are the obvious consideration, it is also important to plan ahead for situations in which the weather might affect class activities. For instance, monitoring the radar before and during the school day will provide valuable information that may require moving class back inside, should inclement weather arise. By knowing how the weather may change, teachers can prepare for midday modifications. Precipitation and temperature are not the only weather conditions that can affect outside physical education. Threats such as lightning or wind gusts can be present without rain. A teacher should be cognizant of any potential lighting strikes in the area. Web sites such as weather.com and wunderground.com can be used to monitor winds and lightning strikes in the surrounding areas.

When moving the class outside, it is also important to consider the condition of the playing surface(s). Unbeknownst to the teacher, overnight rain at the school may have saturated the ground, forming puddles. The overnight dew may leave the playing surface wet during the first few hours of school. Thus, teachers must walk the teaching area prior to class to avoid having to make last-minute changes because of surfaces that cannot be used. Also, this walk allows the teacher to see any potential hazards in the playing surface, such as sinkholes, slopes, or inclines, and any physical barriers (e.g., fences, posts) that may be in place. All these factors will affect the lesson for the day and are paramount to student and teacher safety.

Although temperatures may drop to a level that makes outside activity appealing, it is important to remember that it may still be hot enough or sunny enough for heat- and sun-related conditions to develop (e.g., sunburns, heat stroke, heat-related illness). With that in mind, via newsletters, web sites, or emails, suggest that students come to school with sunscreen and a personal water bottle. Also, provide water for students and/or allow them to have access to it more frequently. If water fountains are not located in your outdoor classroom, water coolers on a cart may be an alternative approach.

Also, teachers should consider their own safety during time spent teaching outdoors. Although students will be outside for only one period a day, teachers are outside exposed to the elements all day. Thus, precaution from the sun (e.g., sunscreen, hat, sunglasses), dehydration, and other elements must be taken.

Classroom Management
Quality classroom management is paramount to success as a teacher and the overall success of lessons. Said another way, effective classroom management is essential to running a smooth and efficient class. Although most classroom management protocols can be used outside (e.g., freezing, grouping), a few modifications must be made when moving physical education outside. When planning lessons for the outside classroom, some procedures, such as class entrance/exit, methods of communication, boundaries, and expectations and policies may need to be changed.

Teachers must communicate with students regarding where to meet prior to class, as well as where and how to exit the teaching area. An effective entrance/exit system will help with smooth transitions into your lessons, decrease behavior issues, and allow for efficient attendance tak-
Teaching Tips

Teaching inside allows a teacher to use walls, court lines, or tape for easily identifiable boundaries, but those are all absent in an outdoor classroom. Outside, it is especially important to create a finite outdoor classroom—a marked (preferably) or unmarked boundary that students know is not to be crossed. Cones, poly spots, or paint can be used to define the outside teaching area. By establishing clear and well-marked class boundaries, the risk of students wandering off or extending a game or activity into an unsafe area is minimized. Also, knowing the specific dimensions of the area and the usual conditions of the playing surface (e.g., concrete, grass) will help in the creation of lessons.

Akin to the indoor classroom, it is vital that there are clear expectations and policies for the outdoor classroom. Consideration should be given to the restroom policy, where equipment will be stored, where the “time-out” area will be located (if a time-out area is used), and where water will be kept (including when and how often students are allowed to have access to it). These strategies will help make a smooth transition into the outdoor teaching environment.

Lesson Plan Suggestions

Important factors to keep in mind when planning for outdoor classes include spacing, equipment, and outdoor-specific games and activities.

Proper spacing for students is essential for effective lesson flow. The goal should be to keep students active in the outdoor classroom while making sure they are within view and earshot. In addition, proper spacing affects the safety of the outdoor classroom; too many students in one area may present a safety risk.

The equipment used in the outdoor classroom may be different from the equipment used indoors. For example, the use of top-of-the-line indoor basketballs outside on the concrete court is discouraged. Also, certain balls may bounce differently on different surfaces, which may force modifications to an outdoor lesson. Furthermore, it is recommended that an outdoor lesson does not use equipment that could easily get dirty or soak up water, or be damaged by the sun. Normally, equipment will be marked for both indoor and outdoor use, or for use in just one of those environments. Separation of outdoor and indoor equipment will expedite lesson creation and implementation (i.e., already knowing what equipment is available and spending less time searching for equipment). It would also be helpful to build an outdoor equipment arsenal as older equipment is replaced with new.

Certain games and activities that are called on often, that students love, or that are part of the curriculum might be ill suited for teaching outside. Volleyball is a good example of a game that is ill suited for the outdoor classroom. The lack of physical boundaries, such as walls, to keep the ball within an easily retrievable distance and the difficulty of reproducing the many lines of a volleyball court make the game better suited for indoors. Another activity that may be ill suited for the outdoor classroom is teaching students how to throw. The walls of an indoor facility serve as a great feature in reducing the time students spend chasing errant throws. Focus on building lessons around games and activities that are either modified for indoor use or best suited for the environment presented in the outdoor classroom.

For example, flag football and soccer are often taught indoors but modified due to space limitations and safety concerns. If the outdoor classroom allows for...
greater freedom of space, playing these games in their true form would greatly increase the students’ knowledge and understanding. The outdoor classroom may also provide enough space for two or more games or activities to be held at the same time. More space can easily translate into more opportunities for all students to be active at the same time. Take care to keep the physical properties of the outdoor classroom in mind during lesson building—for instance, not setting up an activity to aim toward a fence facing outside of school property will help mitigate unwanted loss of equipment. If the entire outdoor classroom is a concrete surface, plan lessons that will minimize how often, or how easily, students could fail.

**Conclusion**

Teaching outside is not without its challenges. It requires physical educators and students to step outside their comfort zone, but the rewards of a properly executed outdoor lesson are worthwhile. Be mindful that a properly run outdoor physical education class can help connect students’ perceptions of physical education to their everyday life (e.g., I can play these games in my yard or at the park). Effective outdoor classes are helpful for students to become aware of their physical activity opportunities, which are largely outdoors. Do not be afraid to embrace the outdoor classroom—it is a worthwhile experience for the teacher and for the students.

**References**