Commission opposes proposal to authorize military instructors to teach physical education

A proposal to give military instructors special authorization to teach physical education was defeated Friday. (February 14, 2014)

Credit: Jane Meredith Adams, EdSource Today,

Over the opposition of Chairwoman Linda Darling-Hammond and a positive recommendation from staff, the state Commission on Teacher Credentialing narrowly defeated a proposal Friday that would have authorized military instructors to teach physical education as part of their military classes.

After a heated public hearing, commission members voted 6-4 against creating a new category of physical education certification for Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) and Basic Military Drill instructors. The change would have allowed military instructors, who are typically retired military personnel and who are not required to hold a bachelor’s degree, to earn a special authorization to teach physical education by passing a state test in physical education subject content.

JROTC and military drill are high school electives that use Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard curriculum covering fitness, leadership, civics and U.S. history, among other topics. California has 350 JROTC high school programs, each with a minimum of 100 students. The rule change also would have affected instructors in the California Cadet Corps program who hold a credential to teach ROTC or military drill. The Cadet Corps has 6,000 students in the state, according to a statement from the group.

Instead of agreeing to a rule change, several commissioners spoke strongly in favor of having fully certified physical education teachers following a rigorous state-approved curriculum.

Commissioner Richard Zeiger, chief deputy superintendent to State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson, said that salsa dance instructors and marching band leaders also have argued that their classes involve energetic movement and should count toward fulfilling the high school graduation requirement of two years of physical education instruction.

“It’s not that these programs aren’t good,” Zeiger said. “They’re not physical education. We have a set of standards for physical education.”
Particular care should be taken to ensure proper teaching credentials, he noted, because physical education is a mandated area of instruction, similar to mathematics and English.

“We consider physical education a crucial part of a student’s school life and academic preparation,” Zeiger said. “We have resisted the notion that physical education is somehow less important than other required courses.”

Darling-Hammond noted that the legislature had decided years ago to allow school districts, at their discretion, to award physical education credit to students enrolled in JROTC, drill instruction and other classes. Given that, Darling-Hammond argued that JROTC instructors would meet what she described as “a slightly higher standard or significantly higher standard” of expertise if they earned a special authorization to teach physical education.

But commissioner Alicia Williamson, an elementary school teacher in the Cambrian School District in San Jose, took exception to that line of reasoning. “We’re saying that because it’s already happening, we should make it a little better,” Williamson said. “But actually physical education is a serious required subject and we should have a credentialed teacher teaching physical education.”

In making the staff recommendation to approve the regulation change, Tammy Duggan, a consultant to the commission, said that the special authorization would give a military instructor “a little bit of an edge” in persuading an unsure school board to grant physical education credit for military instruction. Offering physical education credit would give students the flexibility in their schedules to enroll in JROTC and would help to avoid potential enrollment declines in military classes, Duggan noted in her report to the commission.

Among the remarks at the hearing was a fervent statement opposing the rule change from Ken Burt, a legislative advocate for the California Teachers Association. The state Legislature decided years ago not to mandate physical education credit for JROTC classes, Burt said. The proposed rule change created a perception that the commission was trying to do “an end run” around the Legislature by giving JROTC the means to pressure school boards to grant the physical education credit. “I believe the commission’s credibility is at stake here,” he said.

Lt. Col. Brian Anderson, chief of staff at the California Military Department, spoke in favor of the rule change at the hearing, noting that military fitness programs have inspired some students to lose weight and become dedicated exercisers. “The physical education community is very passionate about physical education and health,” Anderson said. “So is the military.”
Physical education teachers greeted the defeat of the rule change with delight, expressing particular pleasure in Zeiger’s statement that the state superintendent values physical education as much as other mandated subject areas.

Cindy Lederer, a high school physical education teacher in the Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District, said the support was refreshing because physical education classes were often at risk for losing students to school assemblies or other electives.

“We seem to be the target,” Lederer said. “If it’s not ROTC, it’s cheerleading, band or the music teacher who is after us. It makes us feel devalued.”

Jane Meredith Adams covers student health. Contact her or follow her @JaneAdams. Sign up here for EdHealth, EdSource Today’s free newsletter on student health.

Article before the hearing:

http://edsourc.org/today/2014/commission-opposes-proposal-to-authorize-military-instructors-to-teach-physical-education/57748#Uv-iml7lcj4