



Physical Education in Schools - Both Quality and Quantity are Important

A Statement from the American Cancer Society, the American Diabetes Association, and the American Heart Association on Physical Education

Daily quality physical education in the nation's schools is an important part of a student's comprehensive, well-rounded education program and a means of positively affecting life-long health and well-being. The optimal physical education program will foster a lifetime commitment to physical activity as part of a healthy lifestyle. Ultimately, improved coordinated school health programs, of which physical education is a central component, will augment other prevention efforts and help to reverse the growing epidemic of childhood obesity which threatens to undo decades of progress in the fight against cardiovascular and other diseases. Effective efforts made now will help children avoid a lifetime of chronic disease and disability.

Why Physical Education Is So Important – It's Not Just the Activity Itself

Regular physical activity is associated with a healthier, longer life and with a lower risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, and some cancers.¹ Current recommendations are for children to engage in at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day. Children spend over half their day in school, so it is reasonable to require that they should get at least 30 minutes of that time in school. Physical education should be an important part of that requirement and does more than provide some minutes of moderate-vigorous activity. It also teaches students how to integrate exercise into their lives in order to establish a lifetime of healthy living. Unfortunately, only 3.8% of elementary, 7.9% of middle, and 2.1% of high schools provide daily physical education or its equivalent for the entire school year.² Twenty-two percent of schools do not require students to take any physical education at all.³ Since childhood obesity rates continue to rise across the country, there is public support for more physical education in schools. The vast majority of parents of children under 18 (95%) think physical education should be part of a school curriculum for all students in grades K-12.⁴

In a systematic review of physical education programs that increased the amount of time that students were physically active, students' aerobic and physical fitness increased.⁵ Additionally, the benefits of modifying the school physical education curricula were experienced across diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, among boys and girls, elementary- and high-school students, and in urban and rural settings.⁶ A six-month exercise program among obese children and adolescents reduced body mass index, diabetes risk factors and low-degree inflammation and demonstrated that regular exercise can restore blood vessel function and improve cardiovascular risk factors.⁷ Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study showed that physical education programs do have an impact in combating childhood obesity in young overweight girls. Just an extra hour of exercise a week lessened obesity in this group,⁸

A growing body of evidence demonstrates the benefits of physical education beyond fitness. Several large-scale studies found improvements in students' academic performance and cognitive ability with increased time spent in physical education.⁹ Recent studies have found a

strong correlation between aerobic fitness and academic performance as measured by grades in core subjects and standardized test scores.^{10,11} Additionally, children who spent time in physical education in place of a classroom activity performed no worse academically than students not enrolled in physical education.¹² Physical activity also has a positive impact on tobacco use, insomnia, depression, and anxiety.¹³ Normal-weight children have lower rates of school absenteeism than obese children.¹⁴

The quality of the physical education program, not just the time spent on the class, is the foremost concern. Physical education policy should prioritize quality while, simultaneously and/or subsequently, trying to increase the amount of time physical education is offered in schools.

Ways to Address Quality Physical Education

According to NASPE, a high quality physical education program should enhance the physical, mental, and social/emotional development of every child and incorporate fitness education and assessment to help children understand, improve and/or maintain their physical well-being.

Any legislation and/or regulation to promote quality physical education should consider the following:

- require all school districts to develop and implement a planned, sequential physical education curriculum k-12 that adheres to national and state standards for health and physical education;
- hire a physical education coordinator at the state level to provide resources and offer support to school districts across the state;
- offer regular professional development opportunities to physical education teachers which are specific to the field and require teachers to keep current on emerging technologies, model programs, and improved teaching methods;
- add requirements for fitness, cognitive, and affective assessment in physical education that are based on student improvement and knowledge gain;
- assure that programs have appropriate equipment and adequate indoor and outdoor facilities;
- require that students are active in moderate-vigorous physical activity for the recommended amount of time;
- disallow substitutions for physical education with activities such as marching band or varsity sports;
- do not allow students to opt out of physical education to prepare for other classes or standardized tests; and
- require physical education for graduation and count the physical education grade as part of students' overall grade-point averages.

The Quantity of Physical Education

National organizations including the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, the American Diabetes Association, NASPE, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Institute of

Medicine recommend 150 minutes of physical education each week for children in elementary school and 225 minutes per week for middle school and high school. At least 50 percent of physical education class time should be spent in moderate to vigorous physical activity. The American Cancer Society, the American Diabetes Association, and the American Heart Association will continue to support these recommendations as they are revised and updated with the evolving science.

By addressing the quality, quantity and intensity of physical education across the country—the educational component as well as the amount of activity and time spent—policymakers, decision makers, and teachers will maximize children’s potential for a lifetime of physical activity, health and wellness.

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- ⁴ *Public Attitudes toward Physical Education: Are Schools Providing What the Public Wants?* A Survey Conducted by Opinion Research Corporation International of Princeton, NJ, for the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. 2003., http://www.aahperd.org/naspe/pdf_files/survey_public.pdf.
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