

MAKING THE GRADE: REVERSING CHILDHOOD OBESITY IN SCHOOLS TOOLKIT

Why use it?

Physically active children are healthier and achieve academic success.

Today, obesity is one of the most critical health concerns for children in the United States. Nearly one-third of children and teens are overweight or obese—and physical inactivity is a leading contributor to the epidemic.¹ Regrettably, as a result of budget cuts and pressure to ensure students perform well on academic tests, physical education (PE) has been significantly reduced, and in some cases completely eliminated in schools across the country. However, the available evidence shows that children who are physically active and fit tend to perform better in the classroom and that daily physical education does not adversely affect academic performance.²

In their 2010 national action guide the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stated the importance of collaborating with local school districts to incorporate evidence-based curricula to improve the quality of PE and increase the amount of moderate to vigorous physical activity in PE classes.³ Furthermore, the CDC recommended that schools require at least one daily period of recess for at least 20 minutes in length. Although many school districts are concerned that reducing class time to incorporate PE or recess will affect students' performance on standardized tests, evidence points to the contrary. For example, an analysis of FITNESSGRAM test results from over 2.4 million Texas students in grades 3 to 12 during the 2007-08 school year found significant correlations between physical fitness achievement and improved performance on state standardized tests.⁴

The CDC conducted research analyzing the link between PE, recess, classroom physical activity, and extracurricular physical activity on academic achievement (i.e., grades, standardized test scores). In all cases, they found that increased physical activity time—regardless of method—appeared to have a positive correlation or no correlation with cognitive skills and academic achievement. None of the studies found negative associations.⁵ In California, researchers investigated the effect of a rigorous two-year program that more than doubled the amount of time elementary students spent in PE and found no adverse effect on overall academic achievement.⁶

The opportunity of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

Under the administration's blueprint for the reauthorization of ESEA, the section titled Successful, Safe, and Healthy Students states that children's health and safety are extremely important in their own right, but each also is linked to improved academic outcomes.⁷ However, in order to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic in the United States, it is important to go beyond acknowledging the benefits of physical activity to elevating physical education as a core component of a comprehensive curriculum. Although federally mandated curricula is forbidden, the reauthorization of ESEA could highlight the

importance of physical education and physical activity throughout the school day to encourage states and school districts to broaden their curriculum beyond the traditional academic subject areas.

School physical education programs, recess, classroom physical activity, and extracurricular physical activities cannot singlehandedly reverse the current childhood obesity epidemic. However, more than 50 million students spend a significant portion of their daily lives in school; so this social context is surely one of the most powerful institutions shaping the next generation of youth. If district or local school policies are not put in place to ensure that children engage in physical activity during the school day, their risk of obesity will continue to rise. Moreover, for the nearly one-third of children and teens in the United States who are already overweight or obese, schools will miss the opportunity to help impact their health outcomes, and as a result, their academic performance.

The role of schools in the lives of low-income children and children of color may be especially pronounced. Charles E. Basch, an expert on the influence of health factors on educational outcomes and on reducing health and educational disparities in urban minority youth, has stated, "...schools are well-positioned in their communities to have a dramatic influence on the physical activity and social behavior of youth. Students who have the greatest need to increase physical activity, namely urban minority children and adolescents, have the scantest resources and supports to do so."⁸

When compared to the general population, Latino, African American and Native American children are disproportionately affected by obesity, and levels of physical activity are unacceptably low for these children as well which may be largely attributable to the nature of the schools they attend.^{9,10} School districts may not be able to address the needs of this vulnerable population on their own, as districts lack the financial resources to provide all children, and especially low-income children and children of color, with the physical activity opportunities they need to improve their health outcomes. It is therefore critical to have sufficient investment of financial and human resources to provide all U.S. children with greater opportunities for physical activity.

¹ Active Living Research, "Active Education-Physical Education, Physical Activity and Academic Performance," Research Brief, San Diego, Fifth Avenue, August 2009.

²Ibid.

³U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "State Indicator Report on Physical Activity, 2010 National Action Guide," 2010. Available from http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/downloads/PA_State_Indicator_Report_2010_Action_Guide.pdf

⁴ Active Living Research, "Active Education-Physical Education, Physical Activity and Academic Performance," Research Brief, San Diego, Fifth Avenue, August 2009.

⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "The Association Between School-Based Physical Activity, Including Physical Education, and Academic Performance," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,

National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division of Adolescent and School Health, 2010. Available from http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/pape_paper.pdf.

⁶ Charles E. Basch, "Healthier Students are Better Learners: A Missing Link in School Reforms to Close the Achievement Gap," *Equity Matters: Research Review* No. 6, March 2010.

⁷ United States Department of Education, "Successful, Safe, and Healthy Students," 2010. Available from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/successful-safe-healthy.pdf>

⁸ Charles E. Basch, "Healthier Students are Better Learners: A Missing Link in School Reforms to close the Achievement Gap," *Equity Matters: Research Review* No. 6, March 2010.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, "Prevalence of Overweight Among Children and Adolescents: United States, 1999–2002," October 2004.



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