



STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE

The Case for Daily Physical Education

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*Concerns about budget, time, and staffing
can all be satisfied.*

Youth obesity, the most prevalent childhood and adolescent nutritional disease, often leads to adult-type health problems (Dietz, 1998; Nader et al., 2006). In 2001, Surgeon General David Satcher issued a national call to action to prevent and decrease overweight and obesity (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). President Bush later signed into law the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act, which encourages action to address the childhood obesity epidemic and mandates the adoption of local wellness policies (House Education & Workforce Committee, 2004).

According to the 2006 *Shape of the Nation Report*, a recent joint study conducted by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) and the American Heart Association (AHA), only 56 percent of high school students participate in physical education, and the percentage of schools requiring physical education in each grade progressively drops by grade level—from 50 percent in first through fifth grades to 5 percent in grade 12. Further, students attending daily physical education classes declined from 42 percent in 1991 to 28 percent in 2003, and only 8 percent of elementary schools, 6.4 percent of middle/junior high schools, and 5.8 percent of high schools provide daily physical education under recommended guidelines.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendations from the federal government and leading professional organizations in the field indicate that children should be active at least 60 minutes per day. In addition, elementary students should receive 150 minutes of physical education per week, and middle and high school students should get 225 minutes per week, throughout the school year. These guidelines stipulate that all states should set aside adequate time to accomplish these objectives. It is also recommended that (1) only certified/licensed physical education teachers deliver the subject matter, (2) learning standards reflect NASPE's national standards for physical education, and (3) students be expected to achieve the NASPE standards at a specified level of competence.

Response to Recommendations

Public Response. Even though research and statistics appear to speak to the obvious need for increased physical activity of the type provided through quality physical education programs, the public response has been slow, and the 2006 federal budget cuts of approximately \$19 million specifically threaten physical education programs (Committee on Progress in Preventing Childhood Obesity, 2006; National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity, 2005). Public sentiment supports daily physical education requirements. According to a NASPE (2000) survey, 81 percent of adults and 71 percent of teens believe in mandatory, daily, physical education requirements. In addition to developing physical ability and coordination, respondents also believe that physical education helps to prepare children for adulthood by contributing to the development of social skills.

States' Response. The 2006 *Shape of the Nation Report* (NASPE & AHA) reveals that most states require physical education and 69 percent mandate physical education credits for high school graduation. The amount of time that students receive in physical education varies considerably from state to state. For example, Illinois requires students in grades K-12 to receive daily physical education, but it has no mandate pertaining to the number of physical education credits necessary for graduation. New Jersey requires 3.75 credits at the high school level, Arkansas requires only 1/2 credit, and Nebraska requires no high school physical education. According to the *Shape of the Nation* report, a specific amount of instructional time is not mandated by the majority of states, and approximately half of them allow some form of exemption or substitution in the form of participation in other areas, such as athletics, band, and ROTC (reserve officer training corps) programs. Massachusetts and Illinois require physical education in every grade, and New Jersey mandates the highest graduation credit requirement of all the states, yet all three states allow substituted activities or waivers from the requirement. Further, roughly one quarter, or 12 states, allow students to earn online physical education credits, yet only six of those states offer online comprehensive physical education (meeting state or national standards).

Local control of programs has led to great disparity within and throughout states. For example, Tennessee dropped physical education from the curriculum in 1992 under pressure to focus on basic academic subjects (Associated Press, 2006); however, it now requires a one-credit lifetime wellness course.

All states and the District of Columbia certify and license physical educators. Although most states require physical education teachers at the middle and high school levels to hold current certification, only 57 percent require certification at the elementary level. Sixty-nine percent allow temporary or emergency certification for middle and high school, and approximately 66 percent permit alternative certification (out-of-field teachers and/or non-education professionals who pass a physical education certification test) to teach at all levels.

Most states have their own state physical education standards, with the majority reflecting elements of the six NASPE standards. Merely 29 percent, or 15 states, however, require physical education assessment. Less than half (43%) require inclusion of physical education in students' grade-point average, and although 16 states require comprehensive assessment tests for graduation, none includes physical education. According to the *Shape of the Nation Report* (NASPE & AHA, 2006), of the 45 states that have an educational report card, only three (California, Hawaii, and Kentucky) include physical education. South Carolina has since joined this short list of states requiring physical education accountability. Some state leaders, like Governor Charlie Crist of Florida, are actively lobbying for quality, daily physical education and are creating councils like the Governor's Council of Physical Fitness (<http://www.healthyfloridians.com/>).

Physical Education's Role and Obstacles

The goal of providing daily physical education to all K-12 students in the nation's schools presents several challenges that are not easily overcome. If children's health is a national priority, legislators, parents, teachers, school board members, and administrators must collectively work together to develop solutions that have the potential for success at the community level.

Budgetary Issues. It is not surprising that a variety of budgetary ramifications emerge when implementing new policies. School district budgets that are already spread thinly among existing curricular areas often cannot withstand the additional costs associated with policy or curricular reform. In the case of physical education, the cost of increasing the daily requirement, or mandating that the curriculum be taught by a specialist, is more than some districts can afford. Despite the significant need for daily physical education, some districts have very little financial maneuverability and must ultimately make cuts to other important areas of the curriculum in order to implement new policy guidelines. Even in wealthy districts, new policy creates other unanticipated needs such as supplementary professional development, additional equipment, and greater space. Thus, successfully advocating for daily physical education requires skillful negotiation, insider's knowledge of the current budget, and political savvy that is grounded in facts related to the critical need for reform.

Less Time for Other Academic Subjects. Increased time devoted to physical education is likely to raise concerns about reductions to other curricular areas (reading, language arts, math, and science). Although there is a limit to the hours that students can spend at school each day, some schools have the option of adding a class period or extending the school day without reducing instructional time in other subjects. This option, however, has significant budgetary implications. In some cases, teacher unions mandate additional pay for additional work. In other cases, what appears to be a simple change to the length of the school day results in complex revisions to such things as bus scheduling, daycare, and after-school activities.

Increased Need for Physical Education Teachers. Increased physical education certainly requires more physical education teachers at each school. In many states, pupil growth already surpasses teacher availability, and problems like attrition, increased retirements, and fewer numbers of teachers entering the field are unlikely to be resolved within the next decade. For example, the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE, 2005) projected a 2006-07 teacher shortage of 29,604 and estimated an annual need of 20,000 additional teachers each year over the coming decade. In response to this issue, in January 2006, Florida's governor announced a \$293 million plan to recruit and retain teachers. This plan includes a new education minor, allowing the state's colleges and universities to certify more teachers, and the expansion of the Teach in Florida web site, a recruitment tool inviting teachers to post their resume and view employment opportunities.



Photo by Gary Crull

Students get a fitness workout with stretch bands. A daily physical education class offers children their best opportunity for regular physical activity.

Other states have risen to the wellness challenge by providing legislation mandating additional physical education teachers. For example, South Carolina recently enacted the Student Health and Fitness Act 102, requiring a reduction in the ratio of students to physical educators in its elementary schools statewide—from 700 to 1 in 2006-07 to 500 to 1 by the 2008-09 school year (South Carolina Physical Education Assessment Program, n.d.). Instruction time with a certified physical educator will increase from 60 minutes per week in 2006-07 to 90 minutes in 2008-09. Although the South Carolina legislation serves as a model for other states, schools are left with the task of implementing and funding these mandates. As other states in the nation attempt to meet new legislative mandates, they face similar dilemmas. Not only will they have to grapple with financial concerns, they will need to address recruitment and retention.

Revised Curriculum and Lesson Plans. The implementation of daily physical education will also require extensive revisions to curricula. Teachers' plans will need revision, new curriculum will need to be created, and teacher accountability for accomplishing significant student-learning outcomes will need to be increased. Although most states currently have physical education standards, some do not have grade-level expectations. In fact, some teachers have not been held accountable for student learning because they have only limited time with students each week. New requirements, however, will force leaders to rethink their programs in an effort to develop appropriate curriculum and expectations—an exciting, yet challenging process.

Mandating the Mandate. Comprehensive education reform takes time. With everyone vying for more, how do educators successfully get children's health and wellness recognized as a critical item on the education agenda? How do they promote physical education as an ideal venue for addressing the rising rates of obesity-related diseases? Physical educators must prepare themselves to be effective advocates for their programs by acquiring the necessary skills to influence others in a planned and organized fashion. This includes defining goals and objectives, determining target audiences, collecting data, creating and disseminating messages, and implementing well-planned strategies. Fortunately, several national, state, and local associations produce and offer advocacy kits that can be adapted to address unique local needs (e.g., the NASPE web site offers a media-and-advocacy link that includes government relations).

Legislators, school board members, superintendents, principals, and teachers each have a critical role in determining the extent to which physical education will be taught in their communities. Suggestions for those who are interested in making a positive difference include:

- Learn to recognize the appropriate segments of the public and develop a rapport with them.
- Know the roles and responsibilities of key players in reform and work collaboratively toward the goal of mandating and implementing daily physical education for all students in your state.
- Provide policymakers with the critical information they need so they willingly elect to allocate resources to physical education.

Return on Investment. Why should state and local education policymakers support daily physical education for all students? What can parents and students expect from a daily physical education program? Will physical education teachers document program success and student achievement? These are reasonable questions that require thoughtful answers when requesting millions of dollars in funding from legislators. Many physical education programs across the nation, however, cannot produce valid and reliable data in relation to student learning. With fewer than half of the states requiring inclusion of physical education in students' grade-point average, and only 15 states requiring physical education assessment, it becomes difficult to build a case for spending millions of dollars on daily physical education. Physical education practitioners will need to be prepared to answer the question, "Are students making adequate yearly progress?"

In order to become effective lobbyists for daily physical education, and if it is to be maintained in schools where recently mandated, it is imperative to collect data that will help to assess the program and students. Physical education practitioners must be able to clearly articulate to policymakers the measurable differences between the current practices of weekly or biweekly physical education and the enhanced benefits of daily physical education. It is equally important to be able to effectively communicate the benefits of the daily physical education program to students, parents, teachers, the

community at large, and state policymakers. Remember that what matters is measured and what is measured gets done.

Recent research indicates that children and adolescents are in the midst of an obesity epidemic that has worsened over the past 20 years and is expected to continue to increase unless students' nutritional and physical activity needs are satisfied. Unfortunately, response has been slow, and federal budget cuts directly affect school physical education programs. Despite this, leading professional associations and the general public support the call for daily physical education as a means of achieving the minimum national guidelines of 150 minutes of weekly physical activity for elementary students and 225 minutes for middle and high school students.

Budgetary issues, the concern that daily physical education will displace other subject areas, extensive curricular revisions, and the need for additional teachers in a time of critical shortage are a few of the problems that states face when implementing mandated policy changes. Physical education practitioners must learn to become advocates for change by developing goals and strategies, by targeting pertinent audiences with clear messages about the benefits of daily physical education and the long-term implications of a more physically active lifestyle, and by working toward gathering and reporting data that support a significant return on investment.

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~~physical educator assumes a school leadership position and promotes physical activity, not only in physical education class, but before and after school, during classroom activity breaks throughout the day, and through intramurals. The physical activity director can provide unique experiences such as "drop in" sessions where students and staff are encouraged to visit a school workout facility to exercise during a free period.~~

~~Since school personnel are charged with educating our nation's students, part of their responsibility includes helping children develop a lifelong commitment to healthy living. At this critical point in time, the special expertise of the physical educator is particularly needed if schools are to successfully promote increased levels of physical activity and healthy lifestyle patterns. Physical educators no longer need to function isolated from the rest of the school; rather, they have an ideal opportunity to offer insights and move into leadership roles.~~

~~The articles in the first part of this feature address the role of the physical education teacher in relation to teaching physical education, promoting physical activity and wellness across the school curriculum, and creating interesting opportunities for students to engage in activity prior to, during, and after school. In the next issue, the second part of this feature will explore before and after school activity opportunities, school nutrition, and connections between the school and the community.~~

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