



FACTS

Learning For Life

Physical Education in Public Schools

OVERVIEW

Obesity is a major health risk factor linked to increased cardiovascular disease (CVD), certain types of cancer, type 2 diabetes, and early death.¹ But obesity is not just about overeating. Researchers suggest that the childhood obesity epidemic is also the result of a decline in regular physical activity. Too many young people have fallen into a sedentary lifestyle of long hours spent in front of the television and computer and playing video games. To make matters worse, many schools are cutting back on traditional physical education programs because of budgetary concerns and competing academic demands, such as federally mandated standardized tests under the No Child Left Behind Act.²

Regular physical activity is associated with a healthier, longer life and lower risk of CVD, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, and some cancers.¹ Together with other healthy lifestyle choices, such as better nutrition, the American Heart Association strongly advocates for daily, quality physical education in our nation's schools as an important part of a student's education program and as a way to improve life-long health and well-being. Children need a head start on a healthy life.

A GROWING SEDENTARY LIFESTYLE: SERIOUS HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

- The number of overweight pre-schoolers ages 2-5, has jumped by 20% since 1999-2000.³ In 2006, nearly 10 million children and adolescents ages 6-19 were considered obese.³
- Along with rising obesity rates, the rate of prescription drug use by children for diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol is increasing.⁴

- Obese adolescents have a significantly greater risk of developing and dying from chronic diseases in adulthood.⁵
- A recent study showed that the plaque buildup in the neck arteries of obese children or those with high cholesterol is similar to those levels seen in middle-aged adults.⁶
- Of all U.S. deaths from major chronic diseases, 23% are linked to sedentary lifestyles.⁷
- Children's physical activity level drops dramatically between the ages of 9 and 15.⁸

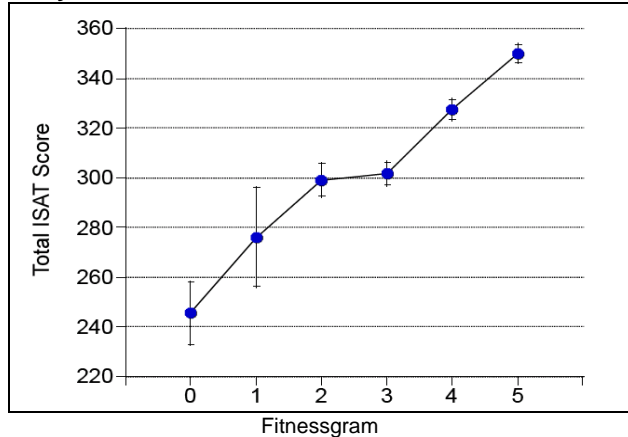
ACTIVE CHILDREN THRIVE ACADEMICALLY AND SOCIALLY

Physically active and educated children are more likely to thrive academically and socially. Through effective physical education, children learn how to incorporate safe and healthy activities into their lives. Physical education is an integral part of developing the "whole" child in social settings and the learning environment.

- Evidence suggests that physical activity has a positive impact on cognitive ability, avoiding tobacco use, insomnia, depression, and anxiety.⁹ Other studies have shown that normal weight children have higher scholastic achievement, less absenteeism, and higher physical fitness than their obese counterparts.^{10,11}
- Recent studies have found a strong correlation between aerobic fitness and academic performance as measured by grades in core subjects and standardized test scores.^{12,13,14}
- Several large-scale studies found improvements in students' academic performance with increased time spent in physical education.¹⁵
- Only 3.8% of elementary schools, 7.9% of middle schools and 2.1% of high schools provide daily physical education or its equivalent for the entire school year. Twenty-two percent of schools do not require students to take any physical education at all.¹⁶

- Yet, 95% of parents believe physical education should be part of a school curriculum for all students in grades K-12.¹⁷

Physical Fitness & Achievement Test Performance*



Source: Hillman CH, Erickson K I, Kramer A F Be smart, exercise your heart: Exercise effects on brain and cognition. *Nat Rev Neurosci*, 2008;9,58-65.

QUANTITY AND QUALITY

- It is recommended that children engage in at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day. It is reasonable for them to get at least 30 minutes of that time in school.¹⁸
- The national recommendation for physical education is 150 minutes per week in elementary and 225 minutes per week in middle and high schools. We will continue to support these recommendations as they are revised and updated with the evolving science.
- The quality of the physical education program is also critical. A high-quality physical education program enhances the physical, mental, and social/emotional development of every child and helps them understand, improve, and maintain physical well-being.

THE AHA ADVOCATES

The American Heart Association advocates for state and federal policy that would:

- Require all school districts to develop and implement a planned K-12 physical education curriculum 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 that are specific to their field.
- Require physical education teachers to be highly-qualified and certified.

- Add fitness, cognitive, and affective assessments in physical education that are based on student improvement and knowledge gain.
- Require that students be active in moderate-vigorous physical activity for at least 50% of physical education class time.
- Assure that physical education programs have appropriate equipment and adequate facilities.
- Not allow students to opt out of physical education to prepare for other classes or standardized tests.
- Not allow waivers or substitutions for physical education. Students should not be permitted to substitute activities such as sports, ROTC, or marching band for physical education.
- Require physical education for graduation and count the physical education grade as part of a student's overall GPA.

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