

The 10 Best and Worst States for Fit Kids

Raising fit kids is a challenge across America, but is it easier or harder than average where you live? To see whether your state is on your side or on the sidelines, we spent five months studying mandated school fitness and nutrition policies. We also examined a dozen-plus other factors relating to healthy lifestyles, including the availability of safe playgrounds, rates of participation in youth sports, and the number of fast-food restaurants.

What we uncovered was astonishing: Just one state requires physical education (PE) class for all students daily, only 1 in 4 specifies a reasonable PE class size, and only two-thirds teach elementary school students about nutrition. "Most states are failing kids and their parents," says Suzanne Smith, an obesity expert and an adviser for our story. Read on to see if your state is among the best or the worst. Even the top states need improvement (and many have legislation in the works), so once you're armed with the facts, go to [child.com's Action Center](#) to advocate for bills mentioned in this story.

THE 10 BEST STATES

1. Connecticut

Our top state didn't have a plan to combat childhood obesity just a few years ago. Then lawmakers sprang into action. Legislation that took effect in July requires physical activity daily for kids in kindergarten to fifth grade. "If a child doesn't have a gym class on any one day (the state encourages 60 to 90 minutes of PE per week for kindergartners to third-graders and 80 to 120 minutes for fourth- to sixth-graders) the school must offer recess," says state Rep. Themis Klarides (R), who introduced the legislation. The law also requires that schools sell low-fat dairy products, water, and fruit when kids are allowed to buy food.

A pilot project that began in September in five of the state's schools goes one better, replacing junk food and soda sold in the cafeteria with only nutritious items, like yogurt and fruit. "The elementary school students haven't complained about the change," reports Colleen Thompson, R.D., co-coordinator of the project.

2. New York

In the late '80s, when most schools were establishing contracts with soft drink companies, New York passed a bill banning the sale of soda, gum, or candy from the beginning of the school day to the end of the lunch period. "It was progressive for its time," says Bob Stern, program manager for the New York State Assembly Task Force on Food, Farm, and Nutrition Policy. "We're now working on ways to stay ahead of the curve."

As we went to press, the state's proposed budget included \$3 million over the next two years for a childhood-obesity-prevention program. The governor's office is also developing Active-8 Kids, a campaign to get children ages 8 and under involved in sports.

On the drawing board: legislation that would extend the ban on soda and candy to the end of the school day and raise time requirements for PE (94% of high-schoolers take PE, the most of our survey and double the national average).

3. Vermont

In 2003, the state launched its Fit & Healthy Kids Initiative, which includes grants for communities and allocates additional funding for Run Girl Run!, a program to increase self-esteem and fitness in middle school girls. It begins with an eight-week summer session to train for a 5K race and offers hiking and snowshoeing during the school year.

Education officials have also drafted a model fitness and nutrition policy. It calls for 150 minutes of PE weekly plus daily recess for students in elementary school (current law requires PE twice a week but doesn't specify an amount of time) and prohibits the use of vending machines during school hours. School districts were reviewing the policy at press time; officials want to have it adopted for the upcoming school year.

4. Massachusetts

Residents are enthusiastic about sports -- and not just the Red Sox. About 1 in 6 of the state's children plays U.S. Youth Soccer -- the most of our survey -- and about 1 in 10 participates in Little League Baseball or Softball. Parents get off the couch too: More than 80% of adults spend some leisure time doing physical activity, and as a result they're leaner than many of their counterparts around the country, with a rate of overweight and obese adults ages 18 to 34 that is significantly below the national average.

Massachusetts is also home to one of the largest Safe Routes to Schools programs in the country; it encourages children to walk or bike to school with parent escorts, offers pedestrian-safety training, and advocates for easier-to-navigate sidewalks, crosswalks, and streets. The results have been impressive so far: In one elementary school, the number of students who hoofed it to class rose from 38% to 56% in just two years.

Nutrition and PE classes in schools are a weak spot, but legislators are close to reform. At press time, state Rep. Peter Koutoujian (D) introduced a bill requiring about three hours a week of PE class or recess and 50 hours yearly of nutrition or wellness education.

5. Missouri

With increased emphasis on standardized reading and math scores, more and more schools are cutting out recess. Missouri is one of only three states requiring the break for elementary school students. The state is also improving PE classes. Case in point: Scores in its standardized physical fitness tests given to fifth- and ninth-graders have risen in the last five years.

One in 6 Missouri children participates in a YMCA program, and the state is one of about two dozen that take part in two comprehensive government programs to track health behaviors in preschoolers and teenagers.

6. Maine

Parents are good role models in this state: They're more likely than the average to eat five servings of produce daily and much more likely to spend their leisure time involved in physical activities. Nearly 40% of moms are breastfeeding at six months, also above the national average.

The state government helps out too: It's banned junk food in the cafeteria and struck a deal with the soft drink industry to remove advertisements from schools. Lawmakers are now debating bills that would require chain restaurants to supply calorie information on the menu and have schools give parents confidential reports about their child's weight.

7. West Virginia

West Virginia is the only state in the country that requires students to take the President's Physical Fitness Test, a government-sponsored program that assesses a child's fitness level in five activities, including pull-ups, curl-ups, and running. Students in all grade levels take part in the program. And the state is only one of fewer than a dozen requiring school districts to evaluate students' fitness levels periodically.

The school cafeteria is looking healthy as well. West Virginia booted candy, soft drinks, and gum out of schools in 2001 and is also one of five states requiring that whole grains be served five or more times per week.

8. Wisconsin

Almost 80 schools in the state give their students a fun homework assignment: Dance, play soccer, or take part in other sports -- preferably with their parents. Many participating schools in the four-year-old Movin' Schools Program earn gift certificates for gym equipment or cash. Each activity is worth a certain number of "miles." "Schools are being extremely creative," says Keith Bakken, executive director of the Wisconsin Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance in LaCrosse. "The classes 'race' each other to a desired destination, such as Yellowstone National Park or Washington, DC."

Wisconsin schools have also received the third-highest amount of physical-education funding from the U.S. Department of Education. Only California and New York, states with much larger populations, have snagged more funding. How did Wisconsin spend the grant money? Says Bakken: "Some middle and high schools have state-of-the-art weight rooms, and many elementary schools offer climbing walls or in-line skating programs."

9. Arkansas

In 2003, realizing that many moms and dads don't know whether their child weighs too much or are in denial about it, Arkansas became the only state in the nation requiring that schools report to parents a child's body mass index (a measure of weight vs. height used to determine whether a person is overweight). "Some parents told us that although they knew their child was overweight,

they weren't motivated to do anything until they saw it in writing," says Joy Rockenbach, program director of the Arkansas Body Mass Index Initiative. The report encourages parents to have their child's doctor confirm the BMI measurement and offer suggestions about how to take action.

A side benefit: The report helps determine whether changes to their PE or lunch programs result in better BMIs. Legislation in 2003 eliminated elementary school students' access to vending machines.

10. Illinois

This Midwestern mecca has long been the only state to require PE classes daily for all students. Unfortunately, it's not quite as good as it sounds: The state has waived the mandate for about one-quarter of its school districts, and a study from Illinois State University in Normal suggests that another 40% of elementary schools skip daily PE without a waiver. Even so, a third of young kids having daily PE is much better than the national average of 8%. "Plus, the state offers some creative programs," says Beth Mahar, past president of the Illinois Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation & Dance.

Among them: the new Namaste Charter School for kindergartners and first-graders in Chicago; it integrates an hour of PE, which includes yoga and Pilates, and a half hour of recess into each school day.

THE 10 WORST STATES

50. Alaska

The state requires PE only for high school students. When it's offered in elementary schools, about 85% of courses are taught by classroom teachers rather than the preferred certified PE specialists. In a new safety rating, playgrounds in the state's parks scored poorly.

49. Nebraska

PE is required just once per week in elementary school, nutrition isn't taught to young children, and the state doesn't require or recommend recess. Parents aren't setting a good example either: Four in five don't get five servings of produce daily.

48. Nevada

This state doesn't require PE in elementary school. Kids aren't active on their own either, with just 1 in 14 participating in YMCA programs and 1 in 29 playing youth soccer, below the U.S. average.

47. Mississippi

In a government study of 32 states, Mississippi had the highest percentage of heavy high school students; about 15% carry around too many extra pounds, and another 15% are on the verge of being overweight.

46. Kansas

This state does things half right. It encourages school districts to follow PE standards but doesn't balk if they do their own thing, and it recommends allowing recess for elementary school students but doesn't ensure it happens.

45. South Dakota

It's one of two states that don't require PE at any grade level. Legislation that requested school districts review (not even ban) the sale of soft drinks and junk food in the school cafeteria didn't pass the state Senate last year.

44. Alabama

Two-thirds of 35- to 49-year-olds are overweight or obese, the parks are in bad shape, and kids aren't active in youth sports.

43. Idaho

Kids and parents are leaner than average here. The playgrounds located in parks, however, are a mess, with about half the equipment containing splinters and rust.

42. Wyoming

Nutrition is a weak spot in this state. It doesn't require that the subject be taught to elementary school students or have legislation restricting junk food in the school cafeteria.

41. Iowa

You'd think this farming state would be loaded with produce lovers, but a mere 17% of adult residents eat five servings of fruits and veggies daily, the third-lowest amount in the country.

The Complete List

1. Connecticut
2. New York
3. Vermont
4. Massachusetts
5. Missouri
6. Maine
7. West Virginia
8. Wisconsin
9. Arkansas
10. Illinois
11. Montana
12. Georgia
13. California
14. Rhode Island

15. Texas
16. New Jersey
17. Oregon
18. Minnesota
19. Colorado
20. Florida
21. Utah
22. Maryland
23. Indiana
24. Washington
25. Michigan
26. Hawaii
27. South Carolina
28. Louisiana
29. Pennsylvania
30. New Hampshire
31. Kentucky
32. Virginia
33. Ohio
34. New Mexico
35. Oklahoma
36. North Carolina
37. North Dakota
38. Delaware
39. Tennessee
40. Arizona
41. Iowa
42. Wyoming
43. Idaho
44. Alabama
45. South Dakota
46. Kansas
47. Mississippi
48. Nevada
49. Nebraska
50. Alaska

Our Championship Team

The following individuals and organizations contributed to the development or analysis of these rankings: Action for Healthy Kids; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Food Research and Action Center; Little League Baseball and Softball; Melinda Johnson, R.D., a Phoenix-based spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association; Dolly Lambdin, Ed.D., the Austin, TX-based president of the National Association for Sport & Physical Education; Julia Graham Lear, Ph.D., director of the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools in Washington, DC; National

Association of the State Boards of Education; National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity; National Conference of State Legislatures; National Program for Playground Safety; Robert Pangrazi, Ph.D., professor emeritus in the department of kinesiology at Arizona State University; The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports; Eric Small, M.D., Mount Kisco, NY-based chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) Committee on Sports Medicine & Fitness; School Nutrition Association; U.S. Census Bureau; Suzanne Smith, senior project manager of obesity for the American Heart Association in Dallas; Howard Taras, M.D., professor of pediatrics at the University of California-San Diego and member of the AAP's Task Force on Obesity; U.S. Youth Soccer; Reginald Washington, M.D., Denver-based co-chair of the AAP's Task Force on Obesity; and YMCA of the USA.

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