

Research & Policy Brief

Physical Activity Challenges in Schools

Overview:

Schools contribute to the overall health and academic performance of youth. Since a large portion of a child's day is spent in school, providing children with opportunities to be physically active during that time can be an important step toward improving a child's health. However, in order to meet standardized testing requirements, many schools across the nation have decreased time spent in Physical Education classes and decreased or eliminated recess time.

Mirroring the national trend, many of Maine's youth do not meet the nationally recommended standard for daily physical activity (PA)*. Ninety-three percent of Maine's high school students do not attend daily physical education (PE)** classes, and nearly 10% of students report that they do no PA at all.⁷ Childhood overweight has increased due in part to physical inactivity. Future complications from childhood overweight include heart disease, type II diabetes mellitus, high cholesterol, arthritis, and high blood pressure.

In an attempt to create a healthy school environment, several states have developed legislation to mandate daily physical activity in schools. These states have demonstrated that it takes the combined efforts of school officials, government agencies, families, and communities to make significant progress toward healthier and more active lifestyles.

Why Support Physical Activity in Schools?

Both PE and PA can significantly contribute to the overall health status of youth. According to the Surgeon General's Report, regular PA is one of the most important things that people can do to maintain and improve their overall well-being.¹¹ The report specifically highlights quality K-12 physical education and regular physical activity on a daily basis for all children as a key action step in combating the youth obesity epidemic.

In most schools the combined time students spend being physically active while in the classroom and in PE class does not meet the national recommendation

of 60 minutes per day for youth. Notably, studies suggest that children who are inactive in school do not compensate for it with increased physical activity outside of school.¹ Ultimately, schools are an ideal place to promote health. The time children spend in school as well as the influential role teachers play in the classroom can affect children's health choices.

What Obstacles Prevent Regular Physical Activity in Schools?

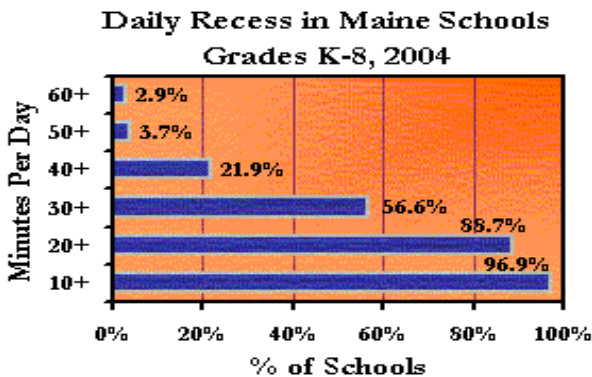
While schools can be an ideal place to promote health, they can also be a barrier. Schools are struggling to meet increasing academic standards in an era of intensifying fiscal restraint. As a result, many schools across the nation have reduced the time students spend in PE classes and have reduced or eliminated recess in order to create more classroom time.

Although many states require that students must receive physical education, most states do not specify a minimum number of minutes per week for physical education. Among the states that specify a minimum, only two states, Louisiana and New Jersey, meet the nationally recommended standard (150 minutes or more of PE per week) for elementary students. Currently only one state, Montana, meets the nationally recommended standard (225 minutes or more of PE per week) for middle and high school students.⁸

The School Health Policies and Program Study 2000 (SHPPS 2000) revealed that even fewer states mandate regularly scheduled physical activities (such as recess) that are separate from physical education. Currently, 11 states recommend and only 3 states require that students receive regularly scheduled recess in elementary school.

Maine has no requirement for elementary schools to provide a regularly scheduled recess. A 2004 gallop survey conducted for Maine CDC found that only 57% of Maine schools have 30 or more minutes of recess daily for students in grades K-8.⁹ Lack of state requirements and state resources to support implementation of PA policies make it a difficult

choice for local school boards to develop and adopt a school policy that supports PA.



Personnel in Maine schools report that one of the biggest obstacles to increasing daily PA in the classroom is lack of time.² Reports from across the country reveal similar barriers to integrating regular PA citing lack of class time, training opportunities and limited resources as obstacles.

How Are States Overcoming Obstacles to Physical Activity in School?

A number of states have implemented programs that increase the amount of PA in the classroom without allocating additional funding or increasing the length of the school day.

North Carolina:

North Carolina schools require that all K-8 students be provided with at least 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous PA each day. This time is intended to complement and not substitute for the PE program. In addition, opportunities for PA cannot be taken away or used as a form of punishment. The activities can be curriculum-based as part of a lesson, or during a recess or a PE class.³ To further promote physical activity in schools, a panel of state agencies and health advocates gathered to produce recommendations for physical activity in North Carolina schools. Out of this panel arose Move More: North Carolina's Recommended Standards for Physical Activity in Schools, a guiding document that serves as an advocacy and strategic tool for policy makers, educators, parents, and community leaders who are interested in increasing physical activity in North Carolina schools.¹⁰

Louisiana:

The Louisiana legislature mandated that all schools provide at least 30 minutes daily of quality PA for all students in grades K-6.⁴ In an effort to meet the

requirements of this legislation, many schools have either implemented classroom-based physical activity programs or extended the school day by five to ten minutes to make room for organized physical activities such as recess. Despite this requirement, compliance remains an issue for many schools due to the emphasis placed on core subjects and high stakes testing.

Texas:

The Texas State Legislature authorized the State Board of Education to require elementary school students to participate in daily PA. The original law did not include minimum time requirements. However, state health advocates lobbied for inclusion of minimum time requirements, insisting that without time requirements, schools may not provide children with an effective amount of physical activity.⁶ The law requires schools to provide students in K-6 with a minimum of 30 minutes of PA a day or 135 minutes per week as part of the Coordinated School Health Program (CSHP) to be implemented by 2007.⁵

Maine:

Although Maine does not have legislation requiring that students participate in daily physical activity, there are several statewide initiatives aimed at promoting physical activity in Maine schools. Maine receives funding from state and federal agencies to fund School Health Coordinators (SHCs). SHCs facilitate the coordination of a healthy school climate. SHCs also assist with health education, which includes the promotion of physical activity as well as school health policy review and development. About 20% of Maine schools have a SHC to coordinate health initiatives.

Maine also has a number of initiatives that promote physical activity in the school environment. These include Safe Routes to School and Take Time!, a classroom – based physical activity program developed in conjunction with Maine-Harvard Center for Public Health and the Muskie School of Public Service. Teachers and administrators who have implemented the Take Time! program have reported a number of positive benefits in their students including a decrease in discipline problems and an increase in focus.²

Policy Implications

As the nation faces a youth obesity epidemic, due in part to a lack of PA and poor diet, some teachers and administrators have shown that PA can be a practical and manageable part of the school day. Schools have an opportunity to provide students with positive PE

and PA experiences at a young age, creating an environment that will support the development of lifelong PA habits. Although many school officials perceive increased time spent on PE and PA as a tradeoff for core academic subjects, many schools have demonstrated that classroom – based physical

activity programs can positively influence the academic environment. It will take the combined efforts of schools, families, communities, government agencies, state health advocates, health providers and the media to make significant progress toward physically active schools.

For additional information:

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* Physical activity is any bodily movement produced by large muscle groups that result in an expenditure of energy.

** Physical Education is a curriculum aimed at teaching fundamental movement skills. The purpose of physical education is to help children develop the appreciation, the knowledge and the fundamental motor skills necessary to participate in lifelong recreation activities.

References

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This policy brief is the second in a series produced by the Physical Activity and Nutrition team at the USM Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, Institute for Public Sector Innovation (IPSI).