

# FACTS

## Learning For Life

### Physical Education in Public Schools

#### OVERVIEW

Childhood obesity has reached epidemic proportions in the United States. About 1 out of every 6 children and adolescents ages six to 19 are considered obese.<sup>1</sup> As these obese children grow older, they have a much greater risk than their normal weight peers of developing and dying from chronic diseases in adulthood.<sup>2</sup> Some experts claim that by 2015, 75% of adults will be overweight with 41% obese.<sup>3,4</sup> One important way to arrest this rise in obesity and chronic disease in our children is through strong physical education programs and regular physical activity throughout the day in our nation's schools.

Children must be physically active at school and learn about keeping healthy through exercise and a balanced diet. Regular physical activity is associated with a healthier, longer life and lower risk of CVD, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, and some cancers.<sup>5</sup> If the lessons of lifetime physical activity and healthy food and beverage choices are modeled at both school and home, children will have the optimal foundation for healthy living.<sup>6</sup> Research shows that healthy children learn more effectively and achieve more academically.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, many schools are cutting back on traditional physical education programs because of budgetary concerns and competing academic demands.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the impact on chronic disease, physical inactivity and obesity place a significant burden on our society. Nearly 17% of U.S. medical costs are attributed to the treatment of obesity<sup>9</sup> and estimates for treatment of childhood obesity are approximately \$14.3 billion.<sup>10</sup> Obesity and lack of physical fitness in America's youth also affect our national security. Senior former military leaders report that 27% of young Americans are too overweight to serve in the military.<sup>11</sup> Around 15,000 potential recruits fail their physicals every year because they are too heavy.<sup>12</sup> The American Heart Association strongly advocates for daily, quality physical education in our nation's schools to give children a healthy head start on life.

#### A GROWING SEDENTARY LIFESTYLE: SERIOUS HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

- A recent study showed that the plaque buildup in the neck arteries of obese children is similar to those levels seen in middle-aged adults.<sup>13</sup>
- Along with rising obesity rates, the rate of prescription drug use by children for diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol is increasing.<sup>14</sup>
- Other research suggests that regular participation in physical education classes helps reduce obesity in low-income teenagers.<sup>15</sup>
- Of all U.S. deaths from major chronic diseases, 23% are linked to sedentary lifestyles.<sup>16</sup>
- Children's physical activity level drops dramatically between the ages of 9 and 15.<sup>17</sup>

#### ACTIVE CHILDREN THRIVE ACADEMICALLY AND SOCIALLY

Physically active 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 for success 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.<sup>18</sup> Other studies have shown that normal weight children have higher scholastic achievement, less absenteeism, and higher physical fitness than their obese counterparts.<sup>19,20</sup>
- Recent studies have found a strong correlation between physical activity and physical education in schools and students' academic performance.<sup>21</sup>
- Unfortunately, a recent report showed that many schools are still offering junk foods and sodas and providing little time for physical activity.<sup>22</sup>
- 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.<sup>23</sup>

- Yet, 95% of parents believe physical education should be part of a school curriculum for all students in grades K-12.<sup>24</sup>

## QUANTITY AND QUALITY

- It is recommended that children engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day. It is reasonable for them to get at least 30 minutes of that time in school.<sup>18</sup>
- The national recommendation for physical education is 150 minutes per week in elementary and 225 minutes per week in middle and high schools.
- The quality of the physical education program is also paramount. A high-quality physical education program taught by a certified physical education teacher enhances the physical, mental, and social/emotional development of all children and helps them understand, improve, and maintain physical well-being.

## THE AHA ADVOCATES

The American Heart Association advocates for daily, quality physical education in our nation's schools, together with other healthy lifestyle choices. We support state 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, including providing 150 minutes per week of physical education in elementary school, 225 minutes per week in middle school and requiring physical education as a condition for graduation from high school.
- 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 valid 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.

- Require physical education for graduation and count the physical education grade as part of a student's overall GPA.

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