FACTS
Teaching America’s Kids A Healthy Lifestyle
Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds

OVERVIEW
Nearly one third of children and adolescents ages 2 to 19 are considered overweight or obese, with one out of six being obese. 1,2 Overweight and obese children who were obese as adults have greater risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and hypertension. 1,3 One possible way to address the current obesity trends is through strong health and physical education (PE) programs and regular physical activity throughout the day in our nation’s schools. 4,5,6

Physical education has been an important tool for providing physical activity in American schools for over a century. It teaches students the basics of physical literacy and how to integrate exercise into their lives in order to establish a lifetime of healthy living. 7 Regular physical activity is associated with a lower risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, and some cancers. 8 Improved physical activity is also associated with better grades in schools. 9,10

Beyond the impact on chronic disease, childhood obesity places a significant burden on our society. Over a lifetime, the estimated medical costs are nearly $20,000 higher for an obese child than a child who maintains normal weight in adulthood. 11 Obesity and lack of physical fitness in America’s youth also affect our national security. A recent study showed that 25% of young Americans are too overweight to serve in the military. 12 Nearly 23 million young adults do not meet the U.S. Army’s weight standards for enlistment. 13

CHILDREN NEED DAILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY
Obesity is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease (CVD), cancer, diabetes, and early death. 14 However, more than half of high school age students do not get enough physical activity. 15

- The 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommend that children engage in at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day. Activities should be age-appropriate, enjoyable, and offer variety. 16
- 15% of adolescents report that they were inactive during the previous week. 15
- Obese preschoolers and elementary students are showing some of the biomarkers related to cardiovascular risk. 17
- Although cholesterol levels in kids have been declining, 20% of children still have high lipid levels and 10% have high blood pressure. 18

- The prevalence of childhood obesity has more than doubled in young children and tripled in adolescents since the 1970s. 19
- Physical Inactivity is linked to 5.3 million deaths per year worldwide and contributes to 12% of the global burden of myocardial infarction. 20,21
- Schools hold a realistic and evidence-based opportunity to increase physical activity among youth and should be a key part of a national strategy to increase physical activity. 7,22
- Children are more likely to get the recommended amount of recess and physical education if they live in states or districts with policies that mandate such activities. 23,24
- Physical education class participation declines significantly from 9th through 12th grades. 15
- Only 48% of high school students attend at least some physical education classes and 29% percent of those students have daily physical education. 15
- A recent report showed that only thirty seven states require physical education at every grade level, and more than half of the states allow students to substitute other activities for their PE credit. 25

A comprehensive community-based intervention that improved the availability of healthful foods and increased opportunities for physical activity successfully decreased the prevalence of overweight and obesity in children. 26 School based interventions which include physical education can improve health and academic performance in low-income students. 27

ACTIVE CHILDREN THRIVE ACADEMICALLY AND SOCIALLY
Physical activity can help improve grades and scores on standardized tests. 28 Through effective physical education, children learn how to incorporate safe and healthy activities into their lives. Physical education is an integral part of a comprehensive education and developing the whole child in social settings and the learning environment. Studies have shown that children who are more physically active reported higher grades than their inactive counterparts. 10

The quality of a school’s PE classes is as important as their frequency if children are to reap the full benefits of regular physical activity. Quality programs based on national and state standards that provide professional development, adequate resources, and sufficient space for physical education and activities are essential.
The American Heart Association advocates to:

- Require states to adopt physical education curriculum standards that are aligned with national standards and are systematically reviewed and updated.
- Require all school districts to develop and implement a planned, K-12 sequential physical education curriculum that adheres to national and state standards for physical education and includes a comprehensive student assessment program.
- Require all physical education teachers to be certified, licensed and endorsed to teach physical education and provide grants to districts to assure their physical education teachers receive adequate professional development specific to their field on an annual basis, especially districts serving at-risk students and minority populations.
- Integrate public health into professional development, educating members of the profession on their role within the public health model.
- Require teachers to keep current on emerging technologies, model programs, and improved teaching methods. Incorporate physical education as a core academic subject.
- Require school districts and schools provide all students with 150 minutes per week of physical education in elementary schools and 225 minutes per week in middle schools and high schools.
- Provide adequate physical education and other physical activity opportunities to facilitate school-age children accumulating at least 60 minutes of physical activity before, during and after school and avoiding prolonged periods of inactivity.
- Require physical education credit(s) for graduation from high school with appropriate accommodations and considerations for children with disabilities and medical conditions.
- Hire a physical education coordinator at the state level to provide resources and offer support to school districts across the state.
- Hire a physical education administrator in the school district to provide support to physical educators in the school district.
- Assure that physical education programs have appropriate equipment and adequate facilities and appropriate student-teacher ratios since research shows that increasing access to human and material resources during class enhances the opportunity for students to engage in the recommended amount and intensity of physical activity.

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