



TALKING ABOUT: BOOSTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH QUALITY PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Physical activity is vital to children's lifelong health and success. When children are physically active, they develop habits that will benefit them now and later in life. Physical activity not only decreases children's risk of developing diabetes and other chronic health problems, it can also increase their capacity for learning.ⁱ

Yet many children aren't active enough. Two out of three U.S. high school students aren't getting recommended levels of physical activity.ⁱⁱ And in California, nearly one in three teens is not regularly active.ⁱⁱⁱ

Improving physical education (P.E.) is one important way to help increase opportunities for students to be active. However, in the face of shrinking budgets and test-score driven legislation, many schools have scaled back on and, in some cases, eliminated P.E. entirely.^{iv} Some low-cost strategies can help California schools reverse this harmful trend.

Why does physical education matter to academic achievement?

- Students who are less physically active tend to have lower grades and test scores.^v Research shows that students who participate in 20 minutes of vigorous activity at least three days a week have better grades.^{vi}
- When students do not get physical activity breaks, they have more trouble concentrating and behaving in the classroom.^{vii}
- Physical activity can improve self-esteem, which is associated with higher academic performance.^{viii}

What challenges within California's P.E. landscape are contributing to inadequate physical activity in P.E. among students?

- California's requirements for total amount of time students spend in P.E. fall well below national recommendations. The state requirement that elementary students get 100 minutes of P.E. per week is one-third lower than national recommendations. And California's requirement that middle- and high-school students receive 200 minutes of P.E. each week is one-fifth lower.^{ix}
- California's P.E. classes often don't provide enough physical activity.^x On average, students in California get only four minutes of vigorous activity for every half hour spent in P.E. class,^{xi} when national guidelines recommend that they be engaged in moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) (that which increases breathing and heart rate in

amounts comparable, respectively, to that for brisk walking and jogging) for at least half of each P.E. class.^{xii}

- Time allotted for physical activity decreases as P.E. class sizes increase, yet many schools have no limit on class size.^{xiii}
- Schools in lower-income communities report that their students – a group already at higher risk for overweight and obesity – spend about 20 percent less time being active during P.E. classes than those in more affluent schools.^{xiv}

What can California schools do to boost physical activity levels through quality P.E.?

- Provide a strong curriculum that effectively increases MVPA and meets state requirements for P.E.
- Make sure students engage in MVPA for at least 50 percent of their P.E. class time.
- Explore low-cost strategies such as using inexpensive or donated equipment (e.g. jump ropes) to increase MVPA in P.E.
- Monitor activity levels using tools such as stopwatches or heart rate monitors.
- Keep P.E. class sizes small so that they are consistent with other subjects and do not exceed 45 students.
- Make sure teachers instructing P.E. are qualified and receive training opportunities.
- Encourage community buy-in and explore funding opportunities by seeking partnerships with local nonprofits, hospitals, sports teams, and other organizations.

References:

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^{xiii} UCLA Center to Eliminate Health Disparities (2007). *Op. Cit.*

^{xiv} *Ibid.*