



REGIONAL RESOURCE

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No Time to Play: Physical Education and Recess in Southern Schools

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Introduction

Obesity among Americans is now considered a serious health concern, with the number of Americans categorized as overweight or obese continuing to rise annually. A similar increase in the number of young people so categorized and a correlating decline in the reported amount of physical activity among this group has raised concerns that America is in danger of becoming a nation of the obese. Risks associated with excessive weight and inadequate exercise include heart disease, diabetes, and an increased susceptibility to cancer and circulatory problems. An increasing number of people with weight-related illnesses and medical conditions is provoking concern among public health officials, health care providers, insurance companies and government medical insurance administrators.¹

A Fall 2000 report from the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services states in dramatic fashion the current situation: "Our nation's young people are, in large measure, inactive, unfit, and increasingly overweight. ...The percentage of young people who are overweight has doubled since 1980."² Causal factors for this are numerous, including the prevalence of community design focused on the automobile, discouraging walking and bicycling and creating obstacles for children to get together and play; increased safety concerns limiting the amount of time children are allowed to play outdoors; the attraction of new technology, particularly new electronic and computer games, satellite and cable television, and videos; limited investment in playgrounds and parks; and a reduction in the amount of time students are required to spend in physical education classes or in free play at recess.³

This *Regional Resource* focuses on this last issue, investigating trends on the national level and providing specific provisions for the 16 Southern Legislative Conference (SLC) member states. Student activity in school is perhaps the most direct way in which state and local policymakers can have an impact on the level of physical activity of young people, and thus on their overall physical fitness. Over the past decade there has been a quantum shift in the direction of physical education programs in schools, with greater emphasis on the development of a positive attitude toward physical activity and the skills required to enjoy a wide variety of physical activities.⁴

School policy has historically been considered largely a local issue, with only limited input from the state and federal government. In recent years, however, this situation has changed, with state government exerting more authority over issues previously seen as the prerogative of local education agencies, for example through the implementation of state-wide standards, testing and accountability measures. States can exert pressure on schools in many ways, of course. Explicit requirements for state accreditation and the threat of loss of state accreditation is perhaps the most direct method. Recommendations from state panels, state control of licensure and funding for both

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school programs and colleges of education and the standard setting authority of the state boards of education are also very potent in directing school policy without issuing a mandate.

A Nation of the Obese

Statistics on weight, obesity, and physical activity present a disturbing picture of America's future. As an aggregate, Americans are growing heavier and less active every year. In the face of a media that extols the virtues of fitness and a culture that reserves its highest regard for superior athletes, more than 60 percent of American adults are not regularly active, and 25 percent are not active at all.⁵

In order to assess what an individual's ideal weight should be, a calculation called a body mass index (BMI) is often used. An individual's BMI is determined by dividing his or her weight in kilograms by height in meters squared ($BMI = \text{wt (kg)} / \text{ht (m)}^2$).⁶ More sophisticated measures of nutritional status are possible as well, although they are, for most individuals, more complicated than necessary. For adults, the recommended BMI is between 20 and 25. Measurements between 25 and 30 are considered overweight. Over 30 is considered obese, with scores over 40 considered grossly obese. Below 20 is considered underweight. It is important to note that ideal BMI for children is different and is measured on gender-specific scales.⁷

America is in the midst of an obesity epidemic. The prevalence of obesity in adults increased by more than 40 percent between 1980 and 1990, with no sign of slowing in the decade that followed. Additionally, about 55 percent of Americans were considered overweight or obese in 1999, with 22 percent of that figure considered obese, and 3 percent very obese (over 100 pounds overweight). Among children between 6 and 11, obesity has increased 54 percent since 1960, with a 40 percent increase among adolescents 12 to 17 years of age.⁸

The SLC region is slightly above average in the prevalence of obesity among its citizens. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), West Virginia has the greatest prevalence of obesity in the

United States, with 23.9 percent of the population with a body mass index of 30 or greater. In all, 13 of the 16 SLC member states had obesity rates in 1999 greater than the national average of 18.9 percent, and no state had a rate lower than 17.6 percent. Table 1 provides a state by state breakdown for prevalence of obesity in the SLC from 1991 to 1999.⁹

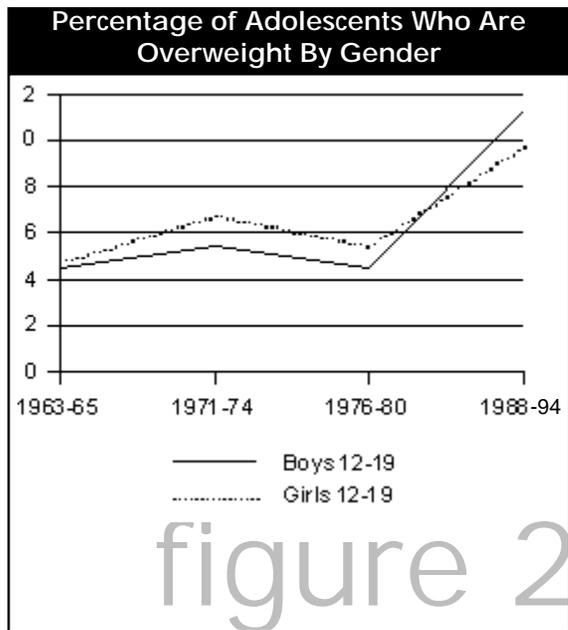
Prevalence of Obesity in the SLC 1991 to 1999				
State	1991	1995	1998	1999
Alabama	13.2	18.3	20.7	21.8
Arkansas	12.8	17.3	19.2	21.9
Florida	10.1	16.5	17.4	17.9
Georgia	9.2	12.6	18.7	20.7
Kentucky	12.7	16.6	19.9	21.1
Louisiana	15.7	17.4	21.3	21.5
Maryland	11.2	15.8	19.8	17.6
Mississippi	15.7	18.6	22.0	22.8
Missouri	12.0	18.0	19.8	20.8
North Carolina	13.0	16.5	19.0	21.0
Oklahoma	11.9	13.0	18.7	20.2
South Carolina	13.8	16.1	20.2	20.2
Tennessee	12.1	18.0	18.5	20.1
Texas	12.7	15.0	19.9	21.1
Virginia	10.1	15.2	18.2	18.6
West Virginia	15.2	17.8	22.9	23.9
U.S. Average	12.0	15.3	17.9	18.9

Source: ⁱPrevalence of Obesity Among U.S. Adults, Region and State, [^]Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Nutrition and Physical Activity Program, Washington, D.C., February 2, 2001.

Obesity has become a major public health concern. At least 300,000 deaths annually in the United States are attributed to inactivity and poor diet, a number of preventable deaths surpassed only by tobacco use.¹⁰ While the increasing girth of American society has been fodder for humor at home and abroad, and has caused a general rethinking of the ergonomics and spatial logistics in everything from movie theater seats, automobiles and depart-

ment stores, the reality of a large society showing every indication of growing larger is becoming a major issue for health professionals, insurance companies and the government. There are myriad factors cited as causing America's obesity explosion, from television and video games replacing less sedentary pursuits as popular pastimes, the profusion of new food products—12,000 annually—many of them in the convenience food category, and community design that discourages walking and bicycling.¹¹ With so many causal factors with which to contend, effecting positive behavior change is a daunting task.

Among youth, the problems of obesity and declining physical activity are even starker than among adults. The percentage of young people (ages 12-19) who are overweight has climbed from just over 4 percent in 1963 to over 10 percent in 1994, with a precipitous increase in the percentage in the 1980s. Among children (ages 6-11) there has been a similar increase, from 4.2 percent in 1963 to 11.4 percent in 1994. Among certain sectors of this population, including Hispanics and blacks, the number of children or youth reported as overweight is greater than 15 percent.¹² Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the growth in the percentage of the youth population considered obese.

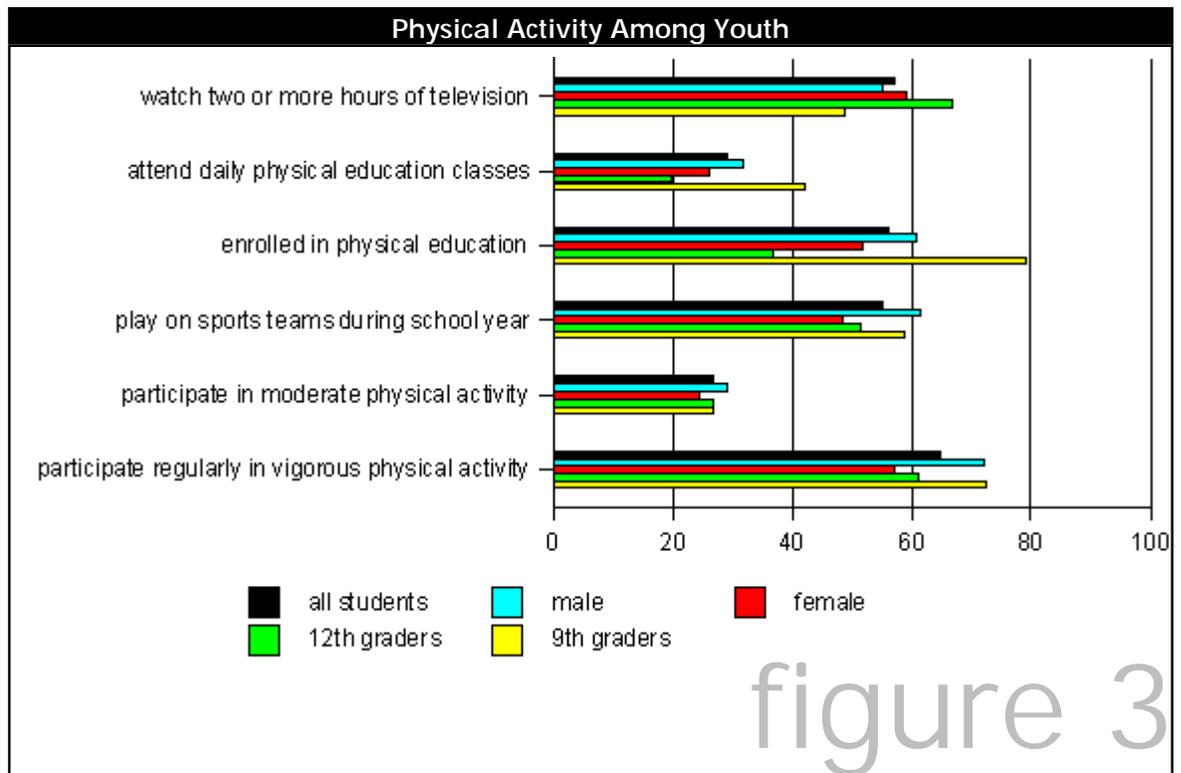


Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, Division of Health Examination Services, unpublished data.



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Declining physical activity is seen as the key factor in the remarkable increase in the prevalence of obesity among children with physical activity levels declining over time.¹³ Children tend to constitute the most active segment of the population, with activity levels beginning to drop as they enter adolescence. As physical activity has declined among all age groups, this tendency has remained consistent, meaning children who are generally less active than is recommended grow into adolescents and teens with serious deficits in their physical activity levels. Among young people at all age levels, a high number of them are not as physically active as is recommended. For high school students, more than one-third do not participate regularly in vigorous activity, nearly half do not participate on any sports teams during the year, and roughly the same number do not participate in physical education.¹⁴ Figure 3 illustrates this information and other data derived from the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS).



Source: CDC, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, 1999.

What is telling about the information presented in figure 3 and elsewhere in the YRBSS data is the decline in physical activity both over time (attendance in physical education classes declined from 42 percent of high schoolers in 1991 to only 29 percent in 1999), and as students get older. The implications of this are ominous. As students graduate from school, they establish patterns of behavior that will follow them for the rest of their lives. If students are not in the habit of regularly engaging in vigorous physical exercise when they graduate high school, they are considerably less likely to begin to do so afterwards.¹⁵ For the 6 percent to 15 percent of schoolchildren who are obese, 27 percent will still be obese 20 years later. When obesity persists into adolescence, the likelihood for obesity to follow into adulthood is even greater. Of the 20 to 30 percent of adolescents who are obese, 80 percent will become obese adults, and they will generally be heavier than adults who became obese after adolescence.¹⁶

Among the most troubling indicators of poor health related to inactivity and weight problems among youth is the increasing incidence of type 2 diabetes in this population.

Type 2 diabetes was formerly so uncommon among children and adolescents that it is generally referred to as adult-onset diabetes.¹⁷ Another health-related concern is the prevalence among children of cardiovascular disease risk factors. Sixty-one percent of children categorized as being overweight present one or more risk factors; 27 percent have two or more.¹⁸

Recess

There are two principal occasions for physical activity in schools: recess and physical education. Recess is generally any unstructured, non-academic time during the day that affords students the opportunity to play. Recess as a period of play and letting off steam is almost exclusively reserved for elementary schools, although not universally. Indeed, most states do not make mention of recess at all in their school requirements, leaving it up to individual school systems to regulate, which often leave non-academic decisions up to individual schools. Because states do not track participation in recess, it is impossible to accurately assess how many students engage in free play on a regular basis in their schools. Anecdotally, however, there seems to be a decline

in the number of schools where recess is a part of the daily routine. The Atlanta Public School System, one of the largest in the country, implemented a no-recess policy in 1998. Other schools across the country have cut back or eliminated free time for students during the day.¹⁹

Recess has vanished from the school day for a variety of reasons. Concerns over safety, violence, and unruly behavior have restricted or eliminated recess in many places. Adding to the pressure to remove this unstructured time are worries about liability and lawsuits from accidents on school property. Most often cited, however, is the pressure on administrators to improve academic performance. As Atlanta's then-Superintendent of Schools Benjamin O. Canada noted, "You don't do that by having kids hanging on the monkey bars."²⁰

Others, however, disagree. Keeping children indoors all day in academic pursuits can be counterproductive. Children in schools that keep them on task throughout the day are bound to become less attentive and more unruly as the day wears on.²¹ "The longer young children spend in classrooms, the longer and more vigorous is their play outdoors...[and] such a release period for them (not to mention the teachers) may facilitate their subsequent attention to more academic tasks and minimize fidgeting and squirming in their seats once they return from recess."²²

Recess also is noted for contributing to the socialization of students. Unstructured, supervised play is an increasingly limited commodity in the lives of American children. Both for the huge number of latchkey children who return to empty homes after school and for those whose non-school time is consumed with an array of scheduled, structured activities such as sports practice and dance lessons, recess may be one of the few opportunities to interact in a social setting with peers. Research indicates that free play augments social and cognitive development that ultimately translates to classroom performance.²³ The connection between free play and socialization is well documented, with research into the benefit and purpose of play dating back to the 19th century. It is, many add, troubling to note that play, once assumed

to be a sacrament of childhood, now must be quantified and evaluated for its inclusion in a child's day.²⁴ Recess, as noted, adds to a child's performance at school. When children are not provided truly free, unstructured opportunities, they have difficulty focusing and keeping their attention on the tasks. Comments education specialist Dr. Jennifer Richard Jacobson, "children need time to think their own thoughts, to create their own plans, to daydream. Losing out on recess also causes children to lose out on the opportunity to build social and problem-solving skills. The playground has always been the place where children have best learned to use logic, to develop strategies and to negotiate."²⁵

Safety concerns about recess are also significantly restricting free time. Liability for student falls, opportunity for injury due to student altercations, and the possibility of students being the targets of violence while at recess all have become factors administrators must weigh in considering a recess policy for their school. Groups such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the International Association for a Child's Right to Play (IPA) have developed materials to assist school leaders in the design and retrofitting of play areas to minimize liability concerns, but worries over school violence and student fighting are more difficult to address. With many school systems resorting to "target hardening" as a first line of defense against school violence, the numerous secluded spaces and the opportunities for students to escape close adult supervision on playgrounds at recess have weighed heavily in decreasing free play's role in schools. Many school safety experts have observed that for young children, the playground is often the least "policed" area of the school and thus the most likely spot for problems to occur.

Physical Education and Recess Are Different

Oftentimes, when schools reduce or eliminate recess, the presence of physical education periods in the schedule are considered as fair substitutes for the activity students would otherwise have during recess. Experts and children both note, however, that the two are not

interchangeable.²⁶ Even young students recognize that physical education classes are, to some degree, academic. They also are not free to choose their activity during physical education, as they are during recess, meaning that those students who would prefer to talk with friends or play solitary games are generally unable to do so. Physical education classes include much of the activity desirable as a pressure release,²⁷ but lack the equally important break from structure. Children who lack these opportunities for self-directed play, whose time is always structured, may lose the ability to be creative.²⁷

Another distinct difference between the two is both the level and focus of activity. During recess, students' activity may range from vigorous to sedentary, as well as from large group to solitary pursuits. Students often will practice games being explored during physical education, but the intent is different depending on the setting. While in class, students' participation is evaluated and assessed, and the emphasis may be more on skill development. This evaluation pressure, regardless of the kind of enterprise, alters the nature of physical activity, diminishing the stress-relieving element to varying degrees. Furthermore, for young children, recess is often an occasion to exercise their imaginations, something that serves as a distraction in most physical education programs.²⁸

Physical Education

Physical education has advanced considerably in the past decade. Gone are the days of coaches rolling out balls and telling the children to play, classes short on skill development and often long on humiliation for students less athletically inclined.²⁹ In today's schools, physical education is more likely conducted with an eye toward improving students' understanding and interest in fitness, with the emphasis placed on preparing students for lifelong physical activity.³⁰ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the current focus of physical education:

- i Emphasizes knowledge and skills for a lifetime of physical activity;
- i Is based on national standards that define what students should know and be able to do;

- i Keeps students active for most of class time;
- i Provides many different physical activity choices;
- i Meets the needs of all students, especially those who are not athletically gifted;
- i Features cooperative, as well as competitive, games;
- i Develops student self-confidence and eliminates practices that humiliate students (e.g., having team captains choose sides, dodgeball and other games of elimination);
- i Assesses students on their progress in reaching goals, not on whether they achieve an absolute standard;
- i Promotes physical activity outside of school;
- i Teaches self-management skills, such as goal-setting and self-monitoring;
- i Focuses, at the high-school level, on helping adolescents make the transition to a physically active adult lifestyle;
- i Actively teaches cooperation, fair play, and responsible participation in physical activity; and
- i Is an enjoyable experience for students.³¹

The national reform movement in education has sought to establish content area standards and benchmarks for success. In response to this, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) began to investigate what outcomes should be expected of a physically educated student. In 1992, NASPE published *Outcomes of Quality Physical Education*, which included a definition of a physically-educated person. Following this, NASPE developed content standards for physical education that further clarified what quality physical education should provide to students and identified 20 outcomes, provided numerous sample benchmarks for grades K-12, and offered specific examples of selected assessment options.³² This guide for the development of curricula has been used broadly across the United States as state education agencies act to reform expectations for physical education.

NASPE's guidelines for physical activity for elementary school recommend that children accumulate 30 to 60 minutes of age- and developmentally-appropriate physical activity from a variety of activities daily, or almost daily, with more than 60 minutes, and up to several hours, encouraged. This physical ac-

tivity should come in periods lasting 10 to 15 minutes or more and include moderate to vigorous activity. NASPE also recommends daily physical education for all students at all grade levels, a standard currently only met by the state of Illinois.³³ Finally, the guidelines call for children to not have extended periods of inactivity.³⁴ The National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) calls for an even more aggressive program of physical education, with daily classes amounting to 150 minutes per week in elementary school and 225 minutes a week in middle and high schools, with at least half of that time spent in actual physical activity.³⁵

The context of these changes—the national education reform movement—is instructive. In many ways, physical education has suffered because of the focus on academic performance, particularly in core subjects. As is the case with other non-academic courses, such as music, art, drama, foreign languages, driver's education and others, physical education is squeezed out of school schedules in order to provide more time for work on core subjects. School accountability programs that assess school quality based on student performance on tests of core content knowledge apply pressure to emphasize only those areas that will be tested. Significantly, only two states in the SLC region—Missouri and South Carolina—include physical education as part of their state accountability standards.

In many ways, this is unfortunate. In addition to the opportunity physical education offers for encouraging a physically active lifestyle and a positive attitude toward physical fitness, studies have indicated that students engaging in physical activity during the school day perform better academically.³⁶ Students who are physically active are reported to have better self-esteem and lower levels of stress and anxiety, all of which should benefit these students academically.³⁷ The connection between physical fitness, physical activity and academic performance, while relatively well accepted, is seldom cited in discussions about improving student academic performance.

Physical Education for Everyone

Another feature of the new thinking on physical education is the extension of course offerings to all students, including those with mental and physical disabilities. This has been advanced in no small part by 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which require schools to make available to eligible children with disabilities special education and related services designed to address their unique educational needs.³⁸ Federal law, which mandates that physical education be provided to students with disabilities, defines this as the development of: physical and motor skills; fundamental motor skills and patterns (throwing, catching, walking, running); and skills in aquatics, dance, individual and group games and sports (including intramural and lifetime sports). To accomplish this, schools provide what is known as adapted physical education, which modifies the curriculum, task or environment so that all students can participate. Adapted physical education national standards also have been developed to assist schools in crafting programs to meet the needs of students with disabilities.³⁹

In addition to expecting participation by students with physical conditions that would previously have excluded them from physical education, advocates also call for the elimination of almost all of the exemptions from participation for able-bodied students. Many states offer some exemption from participation, most notably in high school, if a student participates on an athletic team, ROTC, marching band, or other school or community activity. Because the focus of physical education has shifted from a focus on sports to one of lifetime activity, even a school's most gifted athletes are seen as benefitting from course offerings and should be required to participate alongside their classmates.⁴⁰ In many states in the SLC, exemptions are still relatively common, particularly for sports; according to NASBE, only 10 states in the nation restrict exemptions to those students for whom physical education would jeopardize their health or whose parents request an exemption on religious grounds.⁴¹

Standards-based Physical Education

The standards movement has become a potent force in the design of curricula across disciplines in schools. Essentially, a standards-based curriculum is one which takes as its starting point the expectations for competency (the standards) and works backward to ensure that all students achieve these standards. Establishing a cohesive and meaningful set of standards for each discipline is a difficult process. As was mentioned previously, NASPE took on the task of developing standards for physical education, partly with the objective of ensuring physical education's place and standing among other subjects, particularly core academic courses.

In establishing expectations of what students should know and be able to do for physical education, curriculum planners moved physical education away from gym class and began to focus on teaching students about fitness for life. While students still are expected to run and play ball, there are expectations at every level that they also will learn how movement and activity benefits them, how to avoid injuries, and how to refine and further develop their physical skills throughout life.⁴²

Most states have adopted curricular standards for physical education based upon or informed by NASPE's standards. These identify expectations for the development of motor skills, knowledge and understanding, and the promotion of lifetime health and fitness at all grade levels. They are intended to be sequen-

tial, with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes cultivated in one grade level being reinforced and expanded upon in the next. The approach emphasizes the creation of a positive attitude towards physical activity and the promotion of physical fitness as a healthy habit.

Another element NASPE and others have highlighted is the potential to coordinate physical education and other subjects of a school's curriculum. Incorporating the lessons of physical education in health, biology—particularly human development and physiology—and even physics courses both reinforces the importance of a physically active lifestyle and provides students with highly relevant connections to the subject matter.⁴³

It is perhaps self-evident that as the nature of physical education has undergone a dramatic realignment, demands on instructional staff in the field have increased. Physical education instructors are required to conduct more complex assessments, develop inclusive activities for students with a variety of aptitudes and competencies, and provide instruction in a broad array of developmental, physiological, and kinesthetic content. To be successful, physical education instructors must be well-prepared, well-trained professionals. Certification in physical education is shifting to reflect the changing landscape of the course content, with instructors demonstrating competency with the instructional skills required of any subject and the specialized subject matter required to teach physical education.⁴⁴

State Requirements or Recommendations for Physical Activity

Alabama

Alabama includes physical education in its course of study for students at all levels. In grades K-8, physical education is required on a daily basis for a minimum of 30 minutes. In grades 9-12, one Carnegie unit (equivalent to a full school year) is required for graduation. Benchmarks for physical education are based on national standards. Recess is a local issue. The state requires that at least 360 minutes of a school day be committed to academic instruction. Because a planning period is required for all teachers, the state board of education noted to the SLC that many schools combine recess and physical education periods to provide classroom teachers with a full planning period.



Arkansas

Arkansas requires elementary schools to provide physical education but establishes no minimum time requirement for schools, leaving the decision up to the local school system, which can, if it chooses, delegate the decision to individual school units. At the middle-school level, the state requires a half-unit of physical education during the two-year course of study, a time period that can vary among school systems from seven to nine weeks for those utilizing block scheduling or one semester for those on such a system. In high school, students are required to complete one unit of physical education for graduation. The state has no requirement or recommendation for recess.



Florida

Florida has standards for physical education for all grades K-12, but has no time mandates for either elementary or middle schools. In practice, the amount of physical education students receive varies greatly across the state, with some schools offering classes daily, some only a few times a month, and some not at all. At the high-school level, students are required to take one credit (usually two semesters) of physical education or participate in an interscholastic sport for two seasons and pass a skills test. The state has no policy on recess, leaving the decision to local school agencies. A number of school systems in the state have limited recess, citing concerns over safety and a need to focus on academics in response to the state's school accountability policy.



Georgia

For Georgia elementary and middle school students, physical education and health are considered a single instructional category. Elementary schools are required to offer at least 90 hours of health and physical education annually. Middle schools are instructed by state board of education rules to make physical education available, but face no mandatory instructional time requirements. In high school, students are required to take one half unit (one semester, generally) each of personal fitness and health to receive a diploma. The state does not conduct assessments on student performance in either physical education or health. Georgia also has no rules on recess; indeed, recess is only mentioned in state board rules as part of an explanation as to what is not instructional time. The Atlanta Public School System is notable for being one of the largest school systems in the country to have eliminated recess from the school schedule.



Kentucky

Kentucky has no time requirement for physical education in elementary schools, although most schools provide 30 minutes of instruction twice weekly. In middle schools, the state requires one unit of physical education, generally a nine-week course. High school students must take one half credit (one semester) to graduate. Kentucky assesses students on content in physical education in 5th, 8th, and 10th grades as part of the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS). Because core academic areas (math, science, language arts, and social studies) account for 50 percent of CATS scores, and because health, physical education, vocational edu-



cation and consumerism account for only 7.5 percent, a school's performance on the physical education component of the assessment will not positively or negatively affect that school's performance.



Louisiana

Louisiana requires physical education for elementary school students and recommends it for middle school students. Louisiana treats health and physical education as a unit. Elementary school students are to have a minimum of 150 minutes of physical education and health a week. In middle school, the state suggests either 275 minutes a week of physical education and health for students in schools on six-period days and 250 minutes per week for schools with seven-period days. At the high school level, students are required to complete one-and-a-half units of physical education and a half unit of health (a half unit is generally a semester) in order to graduate. While interscholastic sports are not permissible substitutes for physical education, students in Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) are allowed an exemption from the requirement.

Louisiana schools are not required to offer recess, but the state recommends a time period for that purpose based on the school's scheduling. Three-quarters of the day is suggested to be committed to teacher- or self-directed learning, with the remaining amount of the day split between lunch, snack and rest periods. Some schools, particularly those in New Orleans, have stopped offering recess because of safety and liability concerns.



Maryland

Maryland requires physical education to be part of the school curriculum every year for grades K-8, but provides no time requirements or guidelines. In elementary schools, physical education varies widely, with some schools offering as little as 20 minutes a week and others providing physical education two or three times a week. In middle school, students generally are expected to participate in daily physical education for one quarter of the school year. Should the student be involved in band or art classes, he or she may be pulled out of physical education to participate in those programs. The state requires high school students to complete one half credit of physical education for graduation. The state has content standards for physical education, but requires no assessment. The state also has no requirement or recommendation for recess.



Mississippi

Mississippi has requirements for physical education only in pre-K and kindergarten programs, where students are expected to engage in physical education for 60 minutes and 40 minutes a day, respectively. Legislation being considered by the Mississippi Legislature during the 2001 session proposed requiring physical education to be taught at all grade levels, but died in committee. The state has no recess requirements.



Missouri

Missouri requires physical education of students at all levels. In elementary schools, students are expected to receive a minimum of 50 minutes a week, with most students receiving two 30-minute classes a week. In junior high and middle schools, students are required to take 3,000 minutes a year of physical education, which works out to a 45-minute period every other day, or one semester a year. In high school, students must take one unit, equal to two semesters, for graduation. The state assesses students in the 5th and 9th grades with a written test covering physical education and health questions and a fitness test assessing aerobic capacity, flexibility and strength. The assessment, which will be implemented for the first time in 2001, initially will be used to collect data on health and physical fitness among students and will not be used for school accountability or graduation standards. The state has no policy on recess.

North Carolina

All students in North Carolina are entitled to physical education, according to the state's basic education plan. The state recommends, but does not require, physical education daily or at least three times a week. The only requirements are for high school students, who must complete one course each of health and physical education for graduation. The state has no recess requirement.



Oklahoma

At the state level, Oklahoma has no time requirements for physical education at any grade, nor does it require the completion of a physical education course for graduation, leaving this decision to the state's 544 local school districts. The state department of education likely will begin investigating options on this issue in the near future, however. Oklahoma has a comprehensive, standards-based physical education curriculum, iLifetime health and fitness: A curriculum for physical education and has conducted several workshops for teachers, administrators and others on how movement helps students learn. The state has no recess requirement, but most elementary schools include a recess period in their daily schedule.



South Carolina

Because of a change in the state's education code, South Carolina no longer has time requirements for physical education in elementary or middle schools, although most schools still abide by the state's previous standards: 50 minutes a week in elementary school, and every day for nine weeks in middle school. A change in state law in 1995 required two semesters of physical education for high school graduation, composed of a personal fitness and wellness component and a lifetime fitness component. The state has no requirement for recess.



The state has redesigned its physical education curricula, creating four performance criteria for assessment. These criteria require that students: demonstrate competence in at least two movement forms; design and develop an appropriate physical fitness program to achieve a desired level of personal fitness; participate regularly in health-enhancing physical activity outside the physical education class; and meet the gender and age group health-related physical fitness standards as published by the National Association for Sports and Physical Education.

South Carolina was the first state in the country to report physical education program assessments on school accountability reports. Importantly, assessments are of program, and not student performance, and are measures of how well the program in a given school meets the four criteria. Even though students are the yardstick for these criteria, there are no individual scores reported, and scores are attained by determining what percentage of students in the program met the criteria. The criteria are weighted, with the demonstration of competency in movement forms accounting for half of the total. Regular physical activity outside the class is weighted the lowest at 10 percent, with the remaining criteria both scoring 20 percent.

Because state program assessments for physical education will be implemented at all levels, the South Carolina Department of Education has developed considerable support materials for teachers and administrators and is conducting a number of workshops on the new state standards and assessments for physical education.

Tennessee

Tennessee has no time requirements for physical education at any level, having done away with a graduation requirement for physical education in high school in 1993. The decision to require it is left up individual schools, although the course must be available to students in grades K-8. High schools are under no requirement to offer the course, although all students must complete a course in health and wellness which includes a unit on fitness for life. The practical implications of this are mixed. In some areas with large student bodies and adequate facilities,



students have the opportunity for daily physical education with a trained specialist; in smaller schools and those with limited facilities, the course may be offered irregularly and in a limited fashion.

An interesting element of physical education in Tennessee is that courses fall under the same class-size limitations as any other course, meaning that students who take physical education will be in a relatively small class. Furthermore, a shift to block scheduling by many schools has increased the number of credit-earning opportunities for students and has thus provided them with the possibility of fulfilling their academic requirements and taking more elective courses, something that has boosted participation in physical education in recent years, even absent a state mandate.



Texas

Texas has an extensive framework of standards for physical education set out in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, the state's statutorily-supported education code. Until 1995, when the code was revised, the state required physical education either daily or weekly in elementary schools. Currently, there are no standard time requirements for grades K-8. Students in high school must complete three units (a year and a half) of physical education in order to graduate. The state board of education currently is investigating ways to re-incorporate daily physical education into the elementary curriculum, a task complicated by the fact that such classes are considered an enrichment program that are, along with much of the curriculum, within the purview of local education agencies. Texas has no requirements for recess.



Virginia

Virginia requires physical education to be offered at all levels but does not set time parameters for elementary or middle schools. High school students must complete two credits (one year) of health and physical education for graduation. Daily recess is required in all elementary schools, a rule change instituted in the 2000-2001 school year following a movement by parents in the Hampton Roads area to include a daily rest period in local schools. The duration of the required rest period is left to the discretion of the school, but simply by requiring recess, Virginia is one of the few states in the country, and the only one in the SLC, to explicitly require a non-instructional rest period for students.



West Virginia

West Virginia requires physical education to be offered in each grade in K-12. In K-4, physical education can be integrated into another subject or taught independently. In grades 5-8, physical education is to be taught as its own subject. There is no time requirement for grades K-8, although each grade level has instructional goals and objectives. High school students must complete a one credit (two semesters) course of physical education/wellness in order to graduate. In accreditation of schools, the state has a standard for school performance based on the percentage of students passing the President's Physical Fitness Test. Currently, 40 percent or more of students must pass the test, or the school must show increasing performance on the test, as part of their accreditation by the state. The state has no recess requirement.

Conclusions

There is little doubt that America is in the middle of an obesity epidemic. Over half of Americans are overweight or obese. With the nation's youth eschewing physical activity for more sedentary pursuits, it seems almost certain that figure will swell. Reversing this trend is of primary importance, particularly considering the potential costs of hospitalization, early mortality, and added morbidity related to unhealthy weight. The decline in opportunities for students to develop into physically active adults in schools is one of a number of factors that are driving this trend forward, but it may be the one on which lawmakers can have the greatest impact.

The shift away from recess periods for elementary school children is a point of some concern to many. In addition to providing young children an opportunity to be physically active as part of their day, recess also creates a setting for familiarization with social networks and understandings that are critical to a student's mental and social well-being, as well as a chance to release pent-up energy in a positive manner. By cutting out recess, schools eliminate not merely non-instructional time, but often a very necessary opportunity for students to control their environment to the extent that they are able and to vent energy in a positive way.

Recess and physical education are losing ground not out of a mean-spirited conspiracy to push children swiftly into adulthood but out of genuine concern for their future well-being and success. The dual pressures of academic readiness and accountability and concerns over safety and liability often are the trumps that take either or both of these activities. Including physical education, and a student's competency in physical fitness as part of school accountability programs would provide a refuge for physical education. But the programs themselves need to conform to the highest standards in order to be a meaningful part of a school day already crowded by de-

mands. If this is done, however, there is evidence to indicate that students will flourish academically as a result of their being physically active and more positively inclined toward physical fitness.

The value of recess, and the undirected play that is at its heart, is self-evident to most teachers and parents. Concerns around liability and safety are legitimate, however, and efforts should be made to eliminate potential harm that could occur on a school playground. The presence of a sufficient number of adults trained to enforce safety rules and prevent or defuse aggressive, bullying behavior, the design and construction of play equipment that minimizes risk of injury, and collaborative work with community groups, parents, and police to improve school safety all can help to isolate the risks to students at recess. Incorporating recess into the daily schedule also can have decided academic benefits, providing students an appropriate opportunity to blow off steam during the middle of the day, relieving the pent-up energy, frustration, and anxiety that is a regular part of being a child. 

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