



Building the Argument:

The Need for Physical Education and Physical Activity in Our Schools

Study after study proves what educators have long believed to be true: when children's exercise and fitness needs are met, they have the cognitive energy to learn and achieve. Given the growing epidemic of obesity and the link between physical activity and academic performance, we must work together to make quality daily physical education a priority in our schools and to give our children more opportunities to be physically active throughout the school day.

Our children are getting fatter and are developing "adult" diseases.

- Poor diet and inadequate physical activity are the second leading cause of death in the United States and together account for at least 300,000 deaths annually. Obesity and overweight have "reached epidemic proportions in the United States" [1].
- The epidemic has hit our children particularly hard: "today there are nearly twice as many overweight children and almost three times as many overweight adolescents as there were in 1980" [1]. In 2000, 15% of children aged 6 to 11 were overweight and nearly 16% of adolescents were overweight [2].
- The CDC warns that one in three U.S. children born in 2000 will become diabetic unless many more people start eating less and exercising more [3]. Type 2 diabetes in adolescents increased ten-fold between 1982 and 1994 [4].
- Prevention, says U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson, is the key to fighting cardiovascular disease, cancer, Type 2 diabetes, and other chronic diseases—and helping students increase physical activity is one way to put prevention into action [5], [6].

Our children are becoming increasingly less physically active.

- Fewer than 1 in 4 children get 20 minutes of vigorous physical activity per week, and less than 1 in 4 get at least 30 minutes of physical activity per day [7].
- Participation in all types of physical activity declines as age or grade in school increases. By the time they reach their teens, nearly half of America's youth are not vigorously active on a regular basis, and over one-third aged 12 to 17 are physically active less than 3 out of 7 days a week [8].

Many of our children are sedentary at school.

- The vast majority of children (85%) travel to school by car or bus—only 13% of children walk or bike to school [9].
- Since 1989, many school systems have abolished recess, with only "4.1% of states requir[ing] and 22.4% of states recommend[ing] that elementary schools provide students with regularly scheduled recess" [10].
- In grade 9, 72% of students get regular physical activity, but by the time they reach grade 12, only 55% of them are physically active [8]. Nearly 10% of students in grades 9-12 participate in no vigorous or moderate physical activity on a weekly basis [10].



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Emphasis on physical education in the public school system has markedly declined.

- Between 1991 and 1999, the percentage of students who took physical education on a daily basis dropped from 42% to 29% [11].
- Although most states have some mandate for physical education (78.4% at the elementary school level, 85.7% at the middle school level, and 82.4% at the senior high school level [10]), most states require only that physical education be provided. Local districts have control over content and format [12].
- No federal law requires physical education to be included in public schools, and Illinois is the only state to enforce daily physical education requirements in grades K-12 [12].
- While a majority of secondary school principal leaders agree that students' level of physical activity is important, for most the issue is a low priority compared to other concerns such as student achievement, teacher quality, school safety, alcohol and drug prevention, and school budgets. [27]

When children are active, their academic performance improves.

- "Nearly 200 studies on the effect of exercise on cognitive functioning suggest that physical activity supports learning" [13].
- Two studies demonstrated that providing more time for physical activity (by reducing class time) can lead to increased test scores, particularly in the area of mathematics [14], [15], and another study linked physical activity programs to stronger academic achievement, increased concentration, and improved math, reading, and writing test scores [16].
- The California correlation of the SAT-9 with the Fitnessgram, says California State Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin, "provides compelling evidence that the physical well-being of students has a direct impact on their ability to achieve academically. We now have the proof we've been looking for: students achieve best when they are physically fit. Thousands of years ago, the Greeks understood the importance of improving spirit, mind, and body. The research presented here validates their philosophic approach with scientific validation" [17].
- Children with daily physical education exhibit better attendance, a more positive attitude to school, and superior academic performance [18].
- From the Comprehensive School Health Program in McComb, Mississippi, to the SPARK Program founded at San Diego State University, school administrators and education researchers are demonstrating again and again that physical education and physical activity may strengthen academic achievement, self-esteem, and mental health—all leading to stronger student performance [19], [20], [21], [22].
- "Evidence suggests," says the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, "that time spent in physical education does not decrease learning in other subjects. Youth who spend less time in other subjects to allow for regular physical education have been shown to do equally well or better in academic classes" [23].



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Our students and their parents join the U.S. Surgeon General, NASPE, and the CDC in calling for more opportunities for physical activity and physical education.

- A majority of student leaders (72%) feel schools should make physical activity for all students a priority, with 81% calling for more students to get involved in physical activity and 56% stressing the importance of having more physical education classes [24].
- The vast majority of parents (95%) think “physical education should be part of a school curriculum for all students in grades K-12” [25].
- David Satcher, the former U.S. Surgeon General and chair of the Action for Healthy Kids Initiative, calls for all students to receive quality physical education on a daily basis [26].
- The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) calls for all students to receive quality physical education as an integral part of K-12 education. All states, says NASPE, should set minimum standards of achievement in physical education and should develop standards for physical education based on the National Standards for Physical Education [12].
- The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) calls for sequential physical education that helps students develop the skills and knowledge to enjoy and maintain a lifelong physically active lifestyle [8].

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