



Health Policy Snapshot

Childhood Obesity

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ISSUE BRIEF

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Do students who are more active do better in school?

Takeaways:

- Despite the continuing epidemic of childhood obesity, schools are cutting back on physical education (PE) and physical activity programs.¹
- Children who are physically active tend to perform better in school. Time spent on PE does not hinder academic performance.
- Physical activity is linked to other cognitive and behavioral benefits for students, such as improved concentration, better school attendance and fewer classroom disruptions.

Overview

Physical inactivity is a leading cause of obesity and overweight, which currently affect more than 23 million children and adolescents—nearly one out of every three youths.² Studies show that less than half of U.S. children and adolescents meet the Surgeon General's recommendation for at least 60 minutes of moderate activity most days of the week.³ Schools are excellent venues to provide students with daily physical activity that encourages active, healthy lifestyles, yet many simply do not offer programs. In some cases, budget constraints or pressure to improve standardized test scores has prompted schools to reduce physical education and activity.

No federal law requires that schools offer PE. While 48 states have PE standards, a third of states do not require local school districts to comply, and less than 40 percent require student assessments in PE.

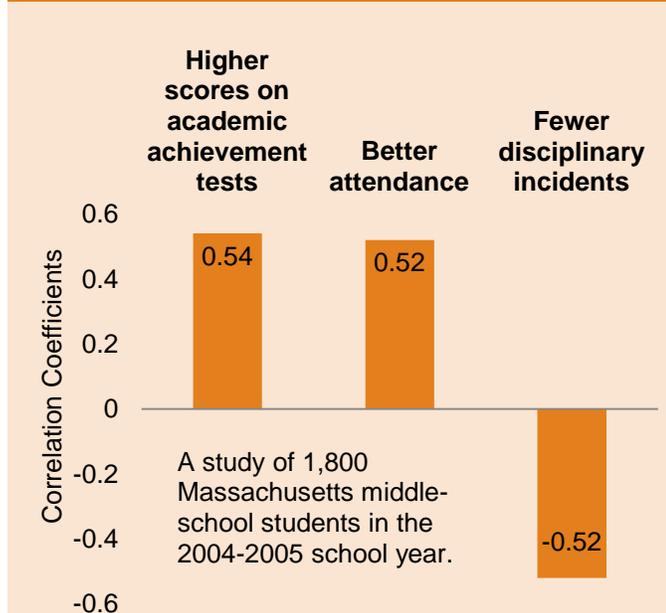
THE STATE OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND ACTIVITY IN SCHOOLS

Most children get little physical activity at school, whether through classes, recess, clubs or intramural sports. According to 2006 figures from the federal School Health Policies and Programs Study—an assessment done every six years—fewer than 4 percent of elementary schools provided students with daily PE. Fewer than 8 percent of middle schools and junior highs and only 2.1 percent of high schools did so. In 2008, fewer than 25 percent of middle school students and 15 percent of high school students participated in intramural sports and physical activity clubs.⁴ The overall numbers mask often sharp disparities among schools based on socioeconomic characteristics. For example, schools in urban areas and schools with high poverty rates or high minority enrollment offer the least time for recess.

THE LINK TO ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

- **A strong body of evidence connects physical activity to improved academic performance.** A 2007 study found that children who perform better on physical fitness tests are more likely to earn higher reading and math scores. Teens who participated in school-based physical activities or played sports at home with their parents were 20

Student Fitness Levels Correlate with Test Performance, Attendance and Disciplinary Incidents



Source: http://activelivingresearch.org/files/Active_Ed_Summer2009.pdf

percent more likely to earn an “A” grade in math or English

- **Increasing PE time may improve standardized test scores.** A 2000-01 Massachusetts study found that students who received at least 56 hours of PE per school year got higher scores on English and language arts standardized tests, compared with students who received 28 or fewer hours of PE.⁵
- **Providing time for physical activity does not decrease standardized test scores.** In 2007, fourth- and fifth-grade students in British Columbia were given an extra 50 minutes of in-class physical activity per week, on top of the standard 80 minutes.⁶ There was no difference in standardized test scores for math, reading and language arts between the students who received additional activity and those who did not.

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS TO STUDENTS

- **Better attendance, fewer disciplinary problems.** Researchers analyzed physical fitness assessments of 2.4 million Texas students in the 2007–08

school year. Higher physical fitness results were associated with better school attendance and fewer incidents of drugs, alcohol, violence or truancy.⁶

- **Enhanced cognitive function.** A 1999 study of elementary school students in New Jersey found that fourth-graders displayed higher levels of concentration after physical activity. A 2008 survey of more than 100 North Carolina school districts found that a statewide policy requiring at least 30 minutes of daily physical activity improved students’ focus and alertness.⁶
- **Improved student behavior.** In 1998, researchers found that Georgia fourth-graders stayed more on task and fidgeted less in class on days when they got a physical activity break. A similar 2006 North Carolina study found that, among students who had the most trouble staying on-task, physical activity breaks improved their behavior by 20 percent.⁶

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- [*Active Education: Physical Education, Physical Activity, and Academic Performance \(Active Living Research\)*](#)
- [*Making the Connection: Linking Academic Achievement to Policies to Promote Physical Activity \(Leadership for Healthy Communities\)*](#)
- [*School Policies and Practices to Improve Health \(Bridging the Gap\)*](#)
- [*Shape of the Nation Report \(NASPE/AHA\)*](#)
- [*Recess Rules: Why the undervalued playtime might be America’s best investment for healthy kids and healthy schools \(RWJF\)*](#)

¹<http://www.aahperd.org/naspe/publications/upload/Shape-of-the-Nation-2010-Final.pdf>.

²<http://rwjf.org/childhoodobesity/challenge.jsp>

³http://www.activelivingresearch.org/files/ALR_Brief_ActiveTransportation.pdf

⁴http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/research/secondary_school_survey/

⁵http://activelivingresearch.org/files/Active_Ed_Summer2009.pdf

⁶http://www.activelivingresearch.org/files/Active_Ed.pdf