

PE MAKES A COMEBACK

Lawmakers are looking at physical education to improve kids' health and academic achievement.



BY AMY WINTERFELD

Kids are getting fatter. Obesity rates over the last 30 years have more than quadrupled for children ages 6 to 11 and more than tripled for youths ages 12 to 19. Our children and youths are at risk for developing type 2 diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and even asthma.

One way to battle bulging waistlines is to get kids moving. Experts recommend at least 60 minutes of physical activity five days a week for children. Almost 30 percent don't exercise even three days a week.

Lawmakers hope a return to physical education programs will help kids slim down and stay fit. Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Oregon and Texas all passed laws this session with requirements for how much time students must spend in physical education classes or organized physical activity during the school day. About 40 laws have passed the past couple of years, but many states still lack PE time standards at all grade levels and classes that keep kids moving and having fun in a variety of activities.

"Everything we want our young people to achieve is contingent upon their basic health," says Texas Senator Jane Nelson,

Amy Winterfeld covers obesity issues for NCSL.

chair of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee. "We have to stop treating



SENATOR
JANE NELSON
TEXAS

PE as optional, because it is as fundamental to the success of our students as reading, writing and arithmetic."

There's mounting evidence that physical activity not only reduces the risk of chronic diseases, it also helps academic performance. And exercise contributes to the development and maintenance of healthy bones, muscles and joints, and reduces the risk for depression. Experts recommend that all children, from prekindergarten through grade 12, receive daily physical education taught by certified specialists, and that all schools have appropriate class sizes, facilities and equipment.

The National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommends that elementary school students participate in physical education for 150 minutes per week at school, and middle and high school students for 225 minutes per week. The association also recommends that qualified physical edu-

cation teachers provide a developmentally appropriate program, and that a teacher/student ratio similar to other classroom settings is maintained (no greater than one teacher for each 25 students in elementary school and 1/30 for middle and high school). The goal should be to make lifelong exercisers of all kids regardless of athletic ability.

The Texas law, sponsored by Senator Nelson, requires 30 minutes of daily exercise for students in grades K-five this school year, and beginning next year, middle school students also will be covered (30 minutes a day, 135 minutes a week, or 225 minutes over two weeks). Annual, confidential fitness assessments also start this year for students in grades three through 12.

Oregon's law phases in physical education time requirements over the next decade, to provide a minimum of 150 minutes per week of physical education in elementary schools and 210 minutes per week in middle schools. School districts will be able to apply for \$860,000 in grants to help train teachers. The state Department of Education will get \$140,000 to gather information from districts about current physical education programs.

"The return of physical activity to our classrooms will lead to healthy bodies and healthy minds for our children," says Senate President Peter Courtney, the bill sponsor.

In Florida, Representative Will Weatherford was the enthusiastic chief sponsor of a 2007 law that now requires 150 minutes of physical education each week for students in grades K-five and 225 minutes of weekly physical education for grades six-eight. Asked why he sponsored the legislation, Weatherford says, "I think that what's happened over the last 20 years or so is that the obesity epidemic has really hit our youth. Normally, I don't like government interfering with eating habits or physical activity habits, but it is our responsibility to ensure that when children are in school they do have activity. We should be creating a culture of physical activity."



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Traveling around the state, Weatherford visited elementary schools, speaking to teachers, parents, administrators and students. Everyone is supportive, he says. The only concern raised was about taking time away from other school subjects. “Teachers like these kids going out and running around. And kids who go out and run around and burn off energy actually do better academically,” he says.

Weatherford, himself an athlete from an active family of nine children, was also impressed by the research data. “Data indicate that all children should have 30 minutes a day of physical activity to stay healthy, and more would be even better.” And that’s not just for athletes, he says, “It could be dancing, or playing team sports or games with their classmates. Anything that gets the heart rate up, gets them out there and active and moving.”

Across the aisle, Weatherford’s colleague, Representative Yolly Roberson, a co-spon-

sor of the legislation sees many benefits of physical education for kids, for everyone’s long-term health and for preventing health care costs.

“I’m a nurse and I work in cardiac care,” she explains. “Almost every chronic disease in the nation is tied to obesity—heart attack, hypertension, diabetes, kidney disease. Obesity is a leading cause of the high cost of health care in the nation.” Preventing chronic disease and its costs by encouraging kids to exercise “is the best first step that we have taken in Florida,” says Roberson. “Government shouldn’t have to be involved, but it is necessary. Now every child in the state of Florida has a time when they can get out and be active.” Florida can be a “model,” Roberson adds. “I hope we will encourage all other states to follow in our footsteps. It’s a very important step in the fight against obesity. It’s small but very important.”

Other states passed physical education leg-

Ways to Get Around No Money

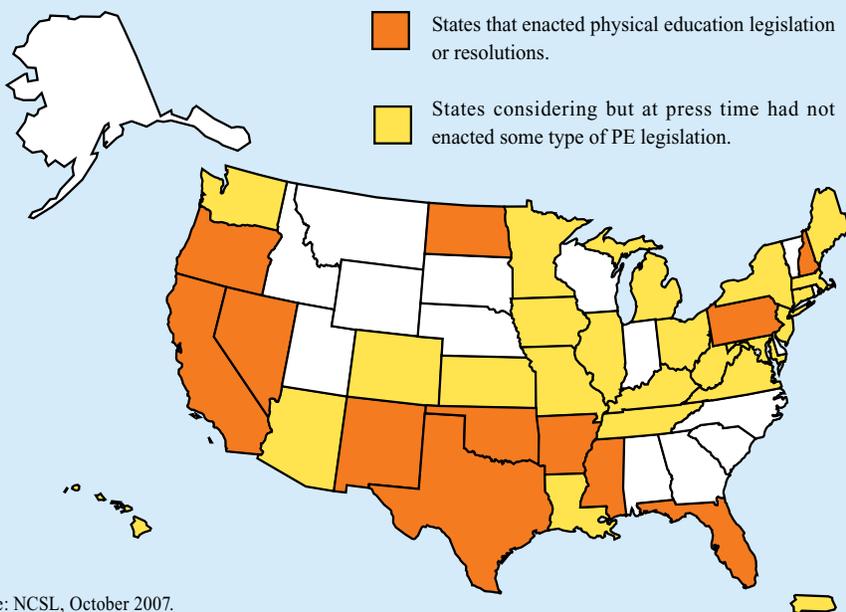
Does your school district need physical education but lack the resources? In poor schools with kids at high risk for inactivity and obesity, PE may be the only chance children have to be active in safe play-spaces and to try certain sports. A set of case studies from California provides ways to help schools overcome obstacles and provide students with high quality PE programs:

- ◆ Use supplemental funds from professional sports clubs (the NFL has just announced a new youth fitness initiative), local businesses, PTA and grants.
- ◆ Work with a local park or recreation center to expand facilities.
- ◆ Provide nontraditional PE games and activities that keep the whole class active and experiencing success at different skill levels.
- ◆ Schedule time for writing grants.
- ◆ Allocate funds in individual schools for PE equipment, teacher training and curricula.

Source: San Diego State University, *What Works for PE*, October 2007.

Gym Class in Schools

Twelve states passed laws or resolutions dealing with physical education in schools in 2007. Legislation was introduced in another 22 states and may carry over next session.



Source: NCSL, October 2007.

islation in 2007. California now requires each school to report its compliance with PE time and fitness requirements. New Mexico calls for phased-in elementary physical education, subject to funding, without time requirements. North Dakota now requires high schools to offer PE. Oklahoma added a PE task force, and elementary PE and recess time requirements. New Hampshire added PE to their list of what makes for an “adequate education.”

Some legislatures turned to resolutions this session to get the PE ball rolling. Nevada urges public schools to preserve and strive to expand the amount of time allocated for physical activity, physical education and recess; and California, Florida and Pennsylvania set a week in May to observe National Physical Education and Sports Week.

As rates of childhood obesity continue to rise, addressing the problem remains a pressing public health concern. Around the country, legislators want to help kids start running, dancing, and leaping to surmount the challenge and to learn a lifelong enjoyment of physical activity.