Supporting Physical Activity in School

Regular physical activity promotes important health benefits, reduces risk for obesity and is linked with enhanced academic performance.1,2 The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other leading public health organizations have issued guidelines and recommendations for promoting physical activity in schools.3,4,5 Yet changes are needed to help schools implement policies and practices that are consistent with national recommendations for physical activity.

This fact sheet highlights evidence-based strategies for increasing physical activity during the school day. It summarizes findings from studies that show how physical education (PE), recess and activity breaks can help children be more active at school.

Children who attend regularly scheduled PE classes get significantly more physical activity.

- High school students who were required to take PE participated in 31 additional minutes of physical activity per week compared with students who were not required to take PE.6
- Among eighth-, ninth- and twelfth-grade girls, those who were enrolled in PE classes spent up to 32 percent more time in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity and up to 60 percent more time in vigorous physical activity than those who were not enrolled in PE.7

Quality PE programs result in more physically active children.

- Students at elementary schools that participated in the Sports, Play, and Active Recreation for Kids (SPARK) program spent about 13 more hours in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity during a single school year than students in control schools.8 The SPARK program provided an organized curriculum with defined health-fitness and skill-fitness units, active classes, and training for teachers.
- Similar results were found among students at schools that participated in the Child and Adolescent Trial for Cardiovascular Health (CATCH) program and other enhanced PE programs.9,10
Training for PE specialists and classroom teachers increases students’ levels of physical activity.

- Classroom teachers and PE specialists who participated in the Child and Adolescent Trial for Cardiovascular Health (CATCH) program increased the amount of physical activity in their classes by more than 30 percent. Students taught by trained PE specialists engaged in even more moderate-to-vigorous physical activity than those taught by trained classroom teachers.11

Children are more active when schools provide supervised recess and designated play spaces.

- A large study of lower-income elementary schools with predominately Latino students found that children who had supervised recess engaged in active play for more than 60 percent of the recess period.12
- Elementary school students who were supervised, had access to portable or loose equipment, and/or had outdoor spaces with colorful playground markings were more active than those at schools without such enhancements.13
- A review of 18 studies concluded that recess contributed up to one-third of the moderate-to-vigorous physical activity recommended for children each day.14

In-class activity breaks increase physical activity and enhance academic achievement.

- Elementary school students who had active classroom breaks improved their ability to stay on task during academic work by 20 percent, but inactive classroom breaks had no effect.15
- Third- and fourth-grade students who participated in Energizers, a program that included in-class physical activity breaks, took nearly 1,000 more steps during the school day than children who were not in the program. Students in the program also paid better attention during academic instruction following those breaks.16

State policies can help promote regular physical activity at school.

- Following implementation of a state law that required public elementary school students in Texas to engage in 30 minutes of daily physical activity, a study found that students across the state participated in about 30 percent more physical activity than the minimum requirement.17 Middle school students in Texas participated in PE four days per week following implementation, up from only two days per week
before implementation. Similar success was observed in North Carolina after the state implemented physical activity standards for K–8 schools.

Summary

Evidence-based strategies for enhancing physical education, recess and in-class activity breaks help children be more active during the school day. In addition, providing students with activity breaks during academic classes improves their academic performance, focus on academic tasks and classroom behavior. Policymakers at all levels, school administrators, community leaders and parents should advocate for policies and programs that align with evidence-based guidelines for physical education and physical activity to help schools provide more opportunities for students to be active.


5 Pate RR, Davis MG, Robinson TN, Stone, EJ. McKenzie TL, Young JC. “Promoting physical activity in children and youth: A leadership role for schools: A leadership role for schools: A scientific statement from the American Heart Association Council on Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Metabolism (Physical Activity Committee) in collaboration with the Councils on Cardiovascular Disease in the Young and Cardiovascular Nursing.” Circulation, 114: 1214–1224, 2006.


