

Physical Education in Schools

The problem of childhood obesity is growing and physical education programs around the country face challenges in terms of funding and quality. A generation of children have graduated with inadequate physical education leading to sedentary lifestyles and an increase in adolescent and adult obesity.

It is useful to see what can be accomplished by looking back over 50 years to the concern about the fitness of students in school after publication of an international study that found American children to be far less fit than children in other countries. In response, President Dwight D. Eisenhower established the President's Council on Youth Fitness by Executive Order in 1956. While the Council was formed, it never really went into action during the Eisenhower administration. John F. Kennedy soon after his election published an article entitled "The Soft American" in Sports Illustrated magazine. He proposed a program including a White House Committee on Health and Fitness; direct oversight by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare; an annual Youth Fitness Congress to be attended by state governors; and the assertion that physical fitness was very much the business of the federal government.

What came to be known as President Kennedy's council did not have the authority to impose a national fitness program, but it developed and distributed a physical education curriculum to improve fitness. The curriculum was devised with the help of 19 educational and medical organizations. Two hundred thousand copies were distributed at no cost and another 40,000 were sold. The council undertook a sweeping promotional program in order to establish the program in as many schools as possible for the 1961–1962 school year. Almost a 250,000 schoolchildren took part in pilot projects in six states. At the end of the year, a fifty percent increase in the number of students who passed a physical fitness test was demonstrated as had passed the same test a year earlier. As a result, there was a general improvement of physical education programs around the country.

What was accomplished over 50 years ago has not persisted today. Students today face greater challenges than ever in getting adequate physical education as the number of schools offering physical education classes has decreased. The quality of classes has also decreased as teachers not trained in physical education have been pressed into service due to overall shortages of school teachers. Changes in communities and families, as well as increasing time spent on computers, smartphones and digital devices all distract students from the needed amount of daily physical activity. Traditional health and physical education classes do not meet the changing needs of students even where these are available.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends that young people participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily to obtain multiple health benefits.

Additionally, participation in physical activity is associated with academic benefits such as improved

concentration , memory, and classroom behavior.

Nine studies cited by the Centers for Disease Control have documented that, in typical physical education classes, students engage in moderate to vigorous physical activity less than 50% of class time. Physical education teachers use too much of their class time for activities related to administrative and management tasks including taking attendance and making announcements.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only 27 % of high school students surveyed participated in at least 60 minutes per day of physical activity on the 7 days prior to being surveyed, and only 29% attended physical education class daily. About one in four teenagers does not engage in 60 minutes of physical activity on any days of the week.

Approximately 17% of Americans age 2 to 19 years old are obese. It is estimated that one of every eight preschoolers in the United States is obese, according to the CDC. And only 25% of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 15 met the national fitness recommendation of 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily in 2012.

Providing updated physical education class curricula with at least 50% of time spent in moderate to vigorous physical activity combined with professional training of physical education teachers has been found to be effective in achieving the goal of increasing moderate to vigorous physical activity to above half the time spent in the physical education class. The impact of these changes and efforts to increase physical activity outside of school hours remains to be determined.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program 9/25/15

Accessed at <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/cspap.htm> 10/24/16