

# Incentives eyed to pump up physical education

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Hamilton County's public elementary school students are required to take 40 to 60 minutes of physical education a week, and middle and high school students have to take just one semester of it, far below the recommendations of the American Heart Association.

But new legislation could require schools to progress toward implementing the association's recommended standards of 150 minutes per week of PE for elementary school students and 225 minutes per week for students in middle and high schools.

With obesity rates soaring among the nation's children, U.S. Rep. Zach Wamp, R-Tenn., and two Democratic lawmakers have introduced a bill that would make physical education a measurable requirement as part of the No Child Left Behind law.

"We believe No Child Left Behind should have incentives built into the law so that PE will return to the public schools," said Rep. Wamp, who introduced the Fitness Integrated with Teaching Kids Act with Reps. Ron Kind, D-Wis., and Jay Inslee, D-Wash. "It's been squeezed out of the curriculum."

No Child Left Behind, up for reauthorization this year, requires schools to meet certain achievement levels in reading and math.

Hamilton County Schools spokeswoman Danielle Clark said that, while administrators understand the need to combat childhood obesity and would support any federal mandates, complying with the proposed PE requirements likely would require the system to reconfigure the school day and hire new teachers.

The legislation does not authorize any funding for such moves.

"There are a limited number of hours in a day where we are with students," Ms. Clark said. "We have a lot on our plate to educate

them. It would require us to shuffle our schedules and decrease the number of minutes we're teaching the arts or science or math. Something's got to give."

Principal Steve Ball said students at Chattanooga School for the Arts and Sciences take PE for 105 minutes a week during elementary school.

In middle school, they take PE for one nine-week period a year, he said. In high school, they take a lifetime fitness course their senior year, in which they become certified in CPR and first aid and write a research paper.

Mr. Ball said the concept of increasing students' physical activity is good.

"The only concern I have," he said, "is are we ready to staff the schools to require PE?"

Rep. Wamp's bill also authorizes a study and pilot program to combat childhood obesity and encourage healthy lifestyles for children.

Those are goals that Tennessee, and in particular Hamilton County, can benefit from, said Allan Lewis, director of cardiopulmonary rehabilitation at Memorial Hospital.

A 2002 study by the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Regional Health Council found 41 percent of Hamilton County residents are overweight and an additional 18 percent are obese according to their body mass indexes, which compare a person's body weight to height.

Six percent of school-age children in Chattanooga have type II diabetes, the study found.

"That's an adult disease," said Dr. Lewis, who also serves on the board of the Greater Southeast affiliate of the American Heart Association.

He attributed the rise in child obesity largely to a decrease in prescribed physical activity for students.

This fall, Tennessee will begin requiring school systems to incorporate 90 minutes a week of physical activity for elementary, middle and high school students, records show. Georgia requires PE only in elementary schools.

"The trend is moving away from having PE every day," Dr. Lewis said. "Classes used to be 50 minutes long, and you had students moving every hour throughout the day. Hamilton County schools have block schedules, so you now have four classes a day, and you're there for an hour and a half each class. They're moving less, they're sitting more, and they're getting less PE."

Rep. Wamp, who founded and co-chairs the Congressional Fitness Caucus, said research shows that healthy children learn more effectively.

The legislation "would ensure a strong emphasis on physical education to help bolster academic performance and provide students with the physical activity and education to lead healthy lifestyles," he said.

The bill has been endorsed by the American Heart Association.

Derek Scholes, government relations manager for the organization, said the bill would not cost schools a lot of money aside from adding a few lines to their federally mandated report cards on their progress in achieving the PE goals.

"We don't think this would be a significant burden on schools," he said. "We're seeing an unprecedented epidemic of obesity in the U.S. An overweight kid has an overwhelming chance of being an overweight adult."

Dr. Lewis said that though schools may balk at the added PE requirements, combating obesity is a cause that warrants tough government standards.

"It's the right time to do this," he said. "This generation of kids being born may not live as long as their parents because they're sedentary more than any other generation, they're exposed to more

high-fat calories, and they will develop more chronic diseases. This is a really good step, and I think it can change our culture."

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