

Other demands out muscling PE instruction

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Tucker Walters, left, and Banesa Segoviano, both 7, work on hand-eye coordination during PE class at Moore Elementary in Franklin, Tenn. By John Russell, AP

By Nanci Hellmich, USA TODAY

Most states require physical education for elementary and high school students, but the time in these classes is often short and is being gobbled up by other academic demands, a new report says. Some classes are even offered online.

The trend could undercut efforts to stave off obesity in children, the researchers say.

These are among the findings of a survey of physical education coordinators in the education agencies of all 50 states and the District of Columbia. It was conducted by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, a group of professionals in the field, and the American Heart Association.

The news comes on the heels of a government report that says one-third of U.S. children and teens — about 25 million kids — are either overweight or on the brink of becoming so. Obesity increases a child's risk of developing serious illnesses such as type 2 diabetes. Among the latest survey's findings:

- Alaska, Colorado, Nebraska, North Dakota, Michigan and Wyoming don't have laws requiring PE classes in elementary, middle or high school. The decision is left up to local school districts.

- Thirty-six states require physical education for elementary school students; 33 for middle school students; and 42 for high school students. But most states do not require a specific amount of instructional time.
- Only New Jersey and Louisiana require elementary students to spend 150 minutes a week in physical education, the amount recommended by the PE association and endorsed by many other leading health groups. Only Montana requires that middle school students get the recommended 225 minutes a week.
- Indiana, Montana and South Carolina and the District of Columbia require the 225 minutes suggested for high school students.
- Twelve states allow PE credits to be earned through online classes.

"There are school districts where students are getting as little as 30 minutes of physical education a week, which isn't enough to allow students to develop the skills they need," says Charlene Burgenson, the PE association's executive director.

Offering the classes online can increase physical activity and teach high school students personal responsibility for an active lifestyle. But "if there is no real accountability for students actually being active and learning skills, then it is a joke," Burgenson says.

Says Russell Pate, professor of exercise science at the University of South Carolina: "Many states, districts and schools will tolerate PE programs that provide children with little physical activity and allow substandard teacher performance. Physical educators should be as vocal in demanding better quality programs as they are in demanding greater quantity of PE exposure for kids."

Howell Wechsler, director of adolescent and school health for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, agrees that many schools don't require enough activity. But some do offer creative programs with activities such as mountain biking, wall climbing and ballroom dancing, he says.

"Many children today don't come home at 3 p.m., drop their book bag and run outside and play like we used to do a generation ago, so they need physical education more than ever before," Wechsler says.

M. Cass Wheeler, chief executive of the heart association, says providing quality physical education would improve the health of the next generation.

But schools have a difficult time squeezing everything in. Bruce Hunter, associate executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, says, "PE and the arts have gotten pushed to the side a little because administrators, principals and teachers are trying to get in as much instructional time as they can to prepare for state achievement tests."

The tightening up on time "has been going on for the past several years, and it has been accelerated with the No Child Left Behind requirements," Hunter says, referring to federally required education goals.

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