



WOMEN'S CITY CLUB OF NEW YORK
TASK FORCE ON PHYSICAL FITNESS
IN THE NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

**PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN NEW YORK CITY'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS:
A MISSING INGREDIENT FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

Since its inception in 2002, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) has employed numerous strategies to improve the academic performance of the city's students. Schools have been reorganized, leadership has been restructured, teaching has been reformed, and the effectiveness of these changes has been linked to specified measures of student achievement. In the drive to reach the desired goals, certain traditional components of the educational experience for children and young people have received little attention. Foremost among these is the inclusion of physical education as a standard component of the curriculum. At present, provision of physical education (P.E.) in the public schools is frequently insufficient, and in some cases is altogether absent. This situation is only the most recent iteration of a long history of non-compliance with New York State mandated requirements for physical education. At the same time, published research studies now often show a positive relationship between physical education and academic performance; such a connection demands a reconsideration of the policies that assign a low priority to the physical education curriculum.

With a growing concern about this important gap in the education of our students, the Women's City Club*, which has a long history of advocacy on educational policy, has established a Task Force on Physical Fitness in the New York City Public Schools. Its charge is to gather relevant information and to advocate for the restoration and inclusion of physical education in all the city's schools in accordance with the state requirements.

I. NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS ARE NOT RELIABLY PROVIDING STATE MANDATED PHYSICAL EDUCATION

In 2004, the Public Advocate, Betsy Gotbaum, published a survey of 100 elementary schools distributed among the five boroughs. All schools surveyed were in violation of the New York State regulations requiring at least 120 minutes of P.E. per week. Of these schools, 57 offered only one class per week to children. Twelve of the schools had no gym classes at all. (1)

*The Women's City Club, established in 1915, is a non-profit, non-partisan, multi-issue activist organization dedicated to improving the lives of all New Yorkers. The WCC shapes public policy to promote responsive government through issue analysis, education, advocacy and civic participation.

Information about the P.E. experience of high school students may be found in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), a survey of 9th to 12th grade students that is conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) every two years in New York City, as well as nationally. The New York State requirement for high schools is a minimum of two P.E. classes per week. In the 2009 YRBS, 18.9% of NYC students indicated they did not attend P.E. classes in an average week. However, 39.5 % claimed to attend P.E. classes daily. (2)

Information from the two sources quoted above is the most reliable that is currently available. Yet findings from a small sample of schools surveyed several years ago, and student self-reports, as in the case of the high schools, fail to provide the data needed for a complete assessment of the present situation. There is clearly a need for a comprehensive, citywide review of student access to P.E. and of the degree to which state mandates are being satisfied.

II. PHYSICAL EDUCATION CAN HELP IMPROVE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

In recent years, scientific studies attempting to link physical education (as well as other forms of physical activity) with academic achievement have proliferated. Careful review of two works offers some important conclusions.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) review, “The Association Between School-Based Physical Activity, Including Physical Education, and Academic Performance” examined 14 studies of school-based physical education and found that 11 of them showed one or more positive associations between physical education and indicators of academic performance. CDC concluded its extensive review as follows:

- There is substantial evidence that physical activity can help improve academic achievement (including grades and standardized test scores).
- The articles in this review suggest that physical activity can have an impact on cognitive skills and attitudes and academic behavior, all of which are important components of improved academic performance. These include enhanced concentration and attention as well as improved classroom behavior.
- Increasing or maintaining time dedicated to physical education may help, and does not appear to adversely impact, academic performance.” (3)

Charles E. Basch in his Research Review, “Healthier Students are Better Learners: A Missing Link in School Reforms to Close the Achievement Gap” reaches similar conclusions. “An emerging body of evidence suggests that school based physical activity programs, such as physical education, have either a neutral or a positive impact on educational outcomes; there appears to be no evidence to support the notion that reducing time for physical education is a sound strategy for increasing academic achievement. Trudeau and Shepard (4) concluded... that an additional curricular emphasis on physical education may result in small absolute gains in academic achievement.” (5)

III. OBSTACLES TO PROVIDING MANDATED PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Simply put, the immediate obstacles to provision of the full amount of physical education required by the state for every grade level are time, space, and money: lack of time in a full curriculum, lack of space in overcrowded schools, lack of funds for P.E. teachers and equipment. Underlying these realities may be attitudes and beliefs among educational leaders about the relative importance of physical education in the academic enterprise, as well as a felt need to emphasize classroom work to meet a defined set of standards in response to external pressures from government and society. Comparable pressures to meet standards for physical education are seldom found.

As the Basch review states, “...school administrators trying to raise standardized test scores may mistakenly believe that physical education curricular time should be sacrificed and reallocated to reading, mathematics, and science. There is currently no evidence that this strategy is effective in increasing standardized test scores....”

With respect to space and equipment, statements in New York City Council Resolution 1539-2008 revealed that of 272 schools surveyed under City Council auspices, 55 (20%) had no gymnasium. The Department of Education Five-Year Capital Plan for 2005-2009 was said to have allocated less than 20% of the estimated funds required for upgrades of gymnasiums and physical fitness. (6)

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The time has come for New York City’s academic community to recognize the vital importance of physical education as a key element in the education of our children. The New York City Department of Education should accept and promote the idea that academic achievement (as well as health) is enhanced by providing adequate physical education. New York State officials have a responsibility to enforce the mandated requirements, and New York City officials have the responsibility to develop the resources and implement the programs to ensure that every student can experience the positive effects of regular physical activity.

The Women’s City Club Task Force on Physical Fitness in New York City Public Schools makes the following recommendations:

- The DOE should compile and publish a complete inventory of physical education curricula, time allocated to P.E. classes, and space dedicated to physical education for each school. The report should include the numbers of certified P.E. teachers and other non-certified teachers who are performing similar functions.
- DOE should develop a five-year plan with goals and timetables to bring all schools into compliance with the New York State physical education requirements. Elements of such a plan would include defining curriculum content and specifying time allocated for P.E.; reorientation of principals and teachers to the content and benefits of P.E. in the curriculum; the addition of necessary numbers of certified P.E. teachers; and an increase in the amounts budgeted for equipment and for the Department of Education’s Capital Plan for P.E. space construction or renovation. The funds that the schools will require to meet the goals of the plan should be included for DOE in the city’s annual budgets.

- Progress toward the goals of the plan should be monitored, measured, and published at least annually. Information about the physical education program, including curriculum and time allocated for P.E. classes, should be included as part of each school's report card. Successful innovations in achieving compliance should be identified, rewarded, and brought up to scale.

By acknowledging the value of physical education and fully integrating it into the New York City public schools, our educational leadership will be making a lasting contribution to the health, well-being and, most notably, the academic achievement of our students. The Women's City Club of New York strongly urges that its comments and recommendations on physical fitness in New York City schools be given careful and full consideration.

Physical Fitness Task Force: Amy Schwartz (Chair), Susan Alt, Gail Edwin, Katherine Lobach, M.D., Phyllis Lusskin, and Barbara Rochman

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References

1. Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum. *All Work and No Play. A Survey of Access to Physical Activity in New York City Public Elementary Schools by the Office of the Public Advocate.* March, 2004.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2009. <http://www.cdc.gov/yrbss>
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *The association between school based physical activity, including physical education, and academic performance.* Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2010.
4. Trudeau, F. & Shepard, R.J. *Physical Education, school physical activity, sports and academic performance.* International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity. 2008.
5. Charles E. Basch. *Healthier Students Are Better Learners: A Missing Link in School Reforms to Close the Achievement Gap.* EQUITY MATTERS: Research Review No. 6. A Research Initiative of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Teacher's College, Columbia University, March, 2010.
6. The New York City Council Resolution 1539-2008 calling upon the New York City Department of Education to develop a plan for the construction/renovation of school gymnasiums as part of its Five-Year Capital Plan in order to comply with New York State physical education requirements and to provide for healthy children and youth. Sponsored by AJ Gerson, GA Brewer, IE Dickens, M Eugene, S Felder, LA Fidler, HD Foster, L James, GO Koppell, JC Liu, DM Recchia, Jr., J Sanders, Jr., K Stewart, T White, Jr. 7/23/2008.

ADDENDUM

White House Task Force on Obesity Recommends Physical Education as the Primary Source of Physical Activity in Schools

Recognizing the critical value of regular physical activity in promoting the health and academic well-being of children, the Women's City Club has developed a strong position in support of a regular, complete curriculum of physical education (PE) for all NYC public school children. When properly scheduled and taught, PE provides the foundation for a lifelong understanding of the value of physical fitness and commitment to regular physical activity. While WCC acknowledges there are many other useful avenues for increasing children's physical activity -- recess, classroom "activity breaks", after school programs, team sports, etc. -- we have focused on PE as the essential component of any general program to promote and improve children's physical activity.

The following reference-based statements from the White House Task Force on Obesity that recommend physical education as the primary source of physical activity in schools provide the rationale for this position:

- "A quality PE program can increase student participation in physical activity, increase their physical fitness, and enhance their understanding about the purpose and methods of physical activity. Participation in daily PE is associated with an increased likelihood of participating in moderate to vigorous physical activity." (p. 70)
- "Influencing students' attitudes towards and perceptions of physical activity may affect their involvement in physical activity outside of PE class. Physical education should encourage students to view physical activity as important and enjoyable. Increasing students' confidence in their ability to engage in physical activity increases the likelihood of enjoyment and therefore, the likelihood of regular participation in physical activity. Students are more likely to have positive attitudes towards physical activity if their needs and interests are met through a variety of activities. They should also understand the many benefits of physical activity and should be able to apply their newly acquired skills through various opportunities." (pp. 70-71)
- "School-based physical activity programs...are anchored in quality PE and complemented by activities before, during and after school...recess, other physical activity breaks...interscholastic sports...walk and bike to school initiatives. These initiatives should not take the place of PE, but should reinforce lessons taught in PE by providing opportunities to practice and apply the skills learned." (p.68)

Because of the many well-known obstacles to offering a full PE curriculum in all schools (time, space, costs, etc.), there is often a suggestion to accept other forms of physical activity in place of PE. But for all the reasons outlined above, recess, activity breaks, etc. should be considered worthwhile supplements, but never substitutes for the provision of the required and requisite PE in every school. WCC firmly reiterates its position and its recommendations to the Department of Education on this issue.