



Case Study of WCC's Physical Education Advocacy in New York City Schools

BACKGROUND

The Women's City Club of New York (WCC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, multi-issue activist organization that is dedicated to improving the quality of life for all New Yorkers. WCC works to shape public policy to promote responsive government through education, issue analysis, advocacy and civic participation. Now in its second century of service, WCC has focused its efforts to empowering women to become more civically engaged.

Despite the well-documented benefits of physical education (PE) for children's health and academic achievement, NYCDOE schools were failing to provide their students with the physical education that is required by the New York State Education Department (NYSED). There was general concern that individual public schools were removing students from classes, including PE and music, that did not directly contribute to the direct preparation of standardized tests. Instead, students were placed in specially designed test-prep classes, with the sole goal of achieving maximum standardized test scores. As school principals were rewarded by the NYCDOE for producing high standardized test scores in basic subjects other than PE or art, an incentive system was created throughout the school environment for maximizing standardized test scores, at the expense of other state-mandated curriculum. In addition, at the time there was insufficient data on the frequency of attendance in PE classes in public schools to confirm this wide-spread assumption.

In 2010, the WCC Physical Education in Schools Task Force (PETF) was created with the objective to raise awareness of the importance of comprehensive physical education (PE) in city schools, as mandated by New York State law, and to call attention to NYC's failure to provide this critical component of education.

WCC's PETF took the position that all students in NYC public schools are entitled to their full State-mandated curriculum, and all the many benefits of school-based PE, and determined that:

- NYCDOE needed to be held accountable for providing all students their complete PE curriculum, including plans for system-wide changes;

- An audit of the provision of PE in public schools is needed to determine the degree to which and scope of compliance with NYS mandate for PE;
- There needs to be an increase in public awareness of the many essential benefits of school-based PE, and failure of NYCDOE to provide the PE;
- A plan for providing all city students with mandated and fully funded PE curriculum, facilities and teachers needs to be developed.

ACTIONS

WCC launched a successful advocacy campaign committed to improving comprehensive physical education in NYC schools, and became a founding member of the Phys Ed 4 All Coalition. Through this work, WCC played an important role in prompting the New York City Comptroller to conduct an audit of the NYC Schools. His audit found that most elementary schools failed to provide mandated physical education.

The WCC Physical Education in Schools Task Force also produced three significant research policy papers, held public conferences, and participated in media programs to illustrate how PE improves academic achievement, student health, and overall well-being and fitness. WCC's advocacy efforts demanding accountability generated audits by the City Comptroller's Office, worked with the Independent Budget Office, requested Freedom of Information files, were featured in public hearings, and became the focus of meetings with legislators and City officials.

- **Spring 2011:** At the WCC's suggestion, the NYC Comptroller audited the provision of physical education in public schools and in October 2011, released [a report](#), which showed that in a sample of elementary schools, most were not meeting state guidelines for physical education and found several significant inadequacies in the physical education program for students in our City.
- **October 2011:** In response to an article about physical education, the New York Times published a [WCC letter](#) to the editor outlining positive association between physical education and academic performance.
- **January 2012:** Dr. Judith West of "Getting Your Money's Worth" invited the WCC Task Force Members to her Manhattan's Public Access Television Station [talk information show](#).
- **March & April 2012:** WCC testified before the City Council for adequate physical education facilities when schools share limited resources in co-located buildings, and in support of funding for the Strategic Alliance for Health, an advocacy partner that conducts parent outreach.
- **November 2012:** Then- Executive Director of WCC publishes an [op-ed](#) in the Huffington Post arguing for greater access to PE in NYC schools.
- **February 2013:** PETF and the American Heart Association (AHA) hosted a press conference with Council Members Melissa Mark-Viverito, Robert Jackson, Letitia James and Gale Brewer urging the NYCDOE to conform physical education programs to State mandates. The WCC released its third report at the conference: The Persistent Problem of Physical Education in the NYC Public Schools.

- **April 2013:** The Task Force held a conference entitled, “Healthy Minds in Healthy Bodies: The Case for Implementing a Full Physical Education Curriculum in New York City’s Public Schools” with Keynote Speaker Dr. Lynn Couturier, Chair and Professor, Department of Physical Education, SUNY Cortland and panelists: then New York City Council Member Robert Jackson, Chair, Education Committee; New York City Council Member Melissa Mark-Viverito, Chair, Parks & Recreation Committee; and Jeff Engel, Assistant Principal, Health and Physical Education, Athletic Director, Long Island City High School, Executive Board Member, Council of School Supervisors and Administrators. The panel was moderated by Beth Fertig, Contributing Education Editor, WNYC Radio, SchoolBook. The conference was featured on [WNYC](#).

Research

[Physical Education in NYC’s Public Schools: A Missing Ingredient for Academic Success](#)
(November 2010).

This WCC report called for restoration and inclusion of physical education in all NYC’s public schools in accordance with State requirements, highlighting research that establishes links between physical education and academic performance as well the reduction of child obesity. The WCC urged the DOE to compile and publish a complete inventory of physical education curricula, as well as the time and space allocated to physical education for each school. Progress toward the goals of the plan should be officially monitored, measured, and published at least annually and be part of each school’s report card.

[Stop Shortchanging Our Children: Bring Physical Education Back to the Curriculum](#)
(February 2012).

This report highlights an audit conducted by the New York City Comptroller in response to WCC’s advocacy, which includes the finding that in a sample of 31 elementary schools throughout all five boroughs, the majority of top administrators in these schools were unaware of the NYS requirements for physical education. The WCC called for a strong directive from the Chancellor that implementation of State-mandated physical education should be one of his priorities, along with a commitment to help obtain the resources schools need to comply with the directive.

[The Persistent Problem of Physical Education in the NYC Public Schools](#)
(January 2013).

The WCC issued its third report, again calling on the NYCDOE to fully comply with New York State’s guidelines for physical education in NYC’s public schools. At the WCC’s request, the New York City Independent Budget Office (IBO) agreed to collect data from DOE’s Annual Facilities Survey on space usage for physical education and on teachers assigned to such classes in each school. The IBO data offers additional insight into the breadth and scope of the issue as the NYCDOE fails to abide by the State’s minimum physical education mandate in our public schools. The research concluded that

in order to meet the required standards for all enrolled students in elementary schools, at least 350 more trained teachers would be needed. High schools, in contrast, have a surplus of trained physical education teachers. The draft report was shared with the NYCDOE who were invited to comment, but to date have not responded to the WCC Task Force.

IMPACT

In 2018, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced the PE Works Initiative, which gave \$100 million to ensure all elementary schools meet State-mandated PE requirements by 2019; and Universal Physical Education initiative to ensure all City schools have a gym by 2021 and all elementary schools get PE teachers by 2019.

With NY Lawyers in Public Interest and the American Heart Association, WCC PETF launched the [Phys Ed 4 All Coalition](#). The Phys Ed for All (PE4All) Coalition is comprised of community-based organizations, advocates, parents, educators, health professionals, and school administrators who are deeply committed to improving wellness by increasing access to quality physical education in New York City public schools. The PE4All Coalition takes a multi-pronged approach to improving PE access, including community education, outreach, and legislative advocacy. The coalition remains active in physical education discussions across New York City and New York State.