

SHAPE OF THE NATION™

EXECUTIVE Summary

Active kids learn better, but the benefits don't end there. Physical education programs teach children lifelong skills to keep them healthy. Physical education addresses the needs of the whole child by helping children exercise both their bodies and their minds, with a positive impact on their physical, mental, and emotional health. Studies show that active and fit children consistently outperform less active, unfit students academically in both the short and the long term. They also demonstrate better classroom behavior, greater ability to focus, and lower rates of absenteeism.

Voices for Healthy Kids, a joint initiative of the American Heart Association and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and SHAPE America – Society of Health and Physical Educators, are pleased to present the 2016 update to the *Shape of the Nation™* on the state of physical education and physical activity in the American education system. This report is designed to inform physical education policies and practices that improve student health and well-being.

As our nation strives for school-age children to achieve the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity, all schools need to commit to making evidence-based physical education the cornerstone of their comprehensive school physical activity program. Physical education programs are a meaningful contributor to the development of healthy, active children and provide the safe, supervised, structured environment children need to learn and practice physically active behaviors.

An ongoing challenge is the diversity of state education legislative and regulatory activity and the resulting variety in policies and implementation approaches. Standards differ widely from state to state and many state policies are broad, leaving implementation details open to interpretation at the local level. Overall, the 2016 *Shape of the Nation* shows striking differences among states. A summary of the state profiles is included below with “states” referring to all 50 states plus the District of Columbia.

- Only Oregon and the District of Columbia meet the national recommendations for weekly time in physical education at both elementary and middle school levels.
- Few states set any minimum amount of time that elementary (19), middle school/junior high (15), and high school (6) students must participate in physical education.
- Just 15 states have additional funding available for physical education programs.

The majority of states do have some basic requirements for physical education programs and those who teach physical education classes:

- Nearly all states (50) have set standards for physical education programs.
- Many states require physical education teachers to meet state professional requirements as well, but it varies by school level—elementary (35), middle school/junior high (43) and high school (48).
- Most states require students to participate in physical education during elementary school (39), middle school/junior high (37) and high school (44).
- More than half of state policies (28) require a type of student assessment.

However, most states also allow waivers, exemptions, and substitutions for physical education, undermining the requirements above:

- Many states (31) allow other activities as substitutions for physical education credit and more than half of state policies (30) allow student exemptions from physical education class time or credit.
- A few states (15) allow school districts to apply for a waiver from the state physical education requirements.

Unfortunately, many states also allow physical activity to be withheld or used as a punishment:

- Only a handful of states (10) prohibit withholding physical activity as punishment.
- Just a few states (13) states prohibit using physical activity as a form of punishment.

Since children from diverse backgrounds spend more than half their waking hours in school, schools can provide equal opportunities for movement to all students, regardless of their zip code. Heart disease and type 2 diabetes have a greater impact on communities of color, and longstanding socio economic challenges leave many schools without the resources to provide physical education classes. The benefits of improving school physical education curricula are realized across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, among boys and girls, elementary and high-school students, and in urban and rural settings.

Kids shouldn't miss out on the benefits of physical education just because of special needs either. National recommendations include individualized plans for students with disabilities and emphasize that physical education is focused on both physical activity and health education. Limiting access to physical education for specific students has consequences in the day-to-day academic environment and for their long term well-being.

The current reality is that 32 percent of children and adolescents (ages 2-19) are overweight or obese, and most are too sedentary, do not meet physical activity recommendations, and are not offered sufficient physical education. In addition, the median physical education budget for schools in the United States is only \$764 per school, per school year. This is a very low investment in a program

that has been proven to be valuable for our children's wellness and academic success.

The conclusion is as clear as the chime of a school bell: while effective physical education and physical activity programs are essential in the formative growth of children and adolescents, there is a large disparity in state requirements and implementation, affecting children's ability to engage in and benefit from these programs. Physical education improves student wellness and academic outcomes, develops life skills that shape the whole person, encourages smart choices and cultivates a healthful lifestyle. In addition to being a win-win for students and educators, physical education and physical activity in schools may be the best hope for the shape of our nation.

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