MISSION: READINESS
COUNCIL FOR A STRONG AMERICA
TEXAS

REPORT



A Roadmap For Increasing Physical Activity in Texas Schools

Physical education, classroom activity breaks, and recess can reduce obesity and improve military eligibility

Acknowledgements

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be citizen-ready.

Mission: Readiness
Retired admirals and generals strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble

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Summary

The link between obesity and poor health outcomes is well-established. What is less well known is the toll that declining fitness is taking on the U.S. military. Department of Defense data shows that nearly one-third of young Americans are now too overweight to serve their country—one of the leading reasons why 71 percent of young adults nationwide and **73 percent of young adults in Texas would not be able to qualify for military service if they tried to join.**[1]

Healthy habits start in childhood, and schools can play an important role in providing opportunities for physical activity. By adolescence, 37 percent of Texas youth are already overweight or obese.[2] Yet both physical education (PE) and recess have declined in schools over the past decade, and more than two-thirds of Texas children get less than 20 minutes of vigorous exercise daily.[3]

Three strategies provide a roadmap for increasing physical activity in Texas schools within the next several years: high-quality PE, classroom activity breaks, and structured recess. In particular, state policymakers can improve the quality of in-school physical activity by requiring districts to complete self-assessments of their PE programs. In the short term, these initiatives will help children lead healthier lives and, in the long term, strengthen national security.



16,000

young people in Texas join the military each year, the 2nd highest enlistment rate in the nation.

Source: Department of Defense 2013

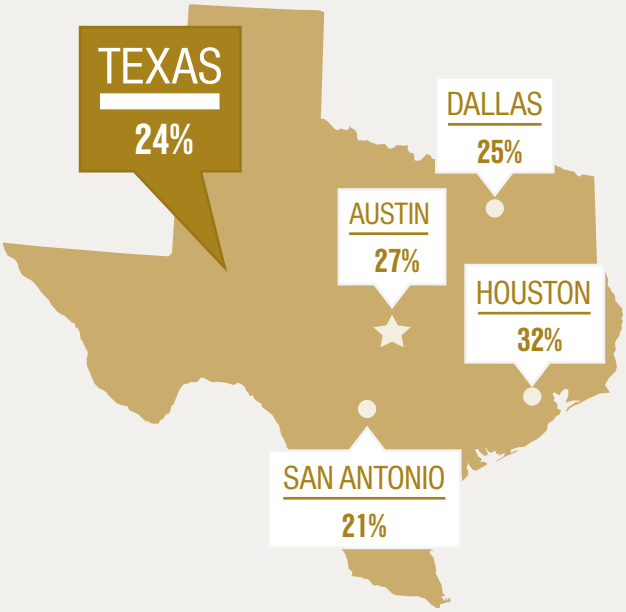
Texas children are not getting enough exercise

The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommend that children engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate or vigorous physical activity each day.[4] Research shows that such activity improves children's strength and endurance, reduces the risk of obesity, and even improves academic performance.[5] For example, children who are active throughout adolescence are more than seven times as likely to become active adults.[6]

In spite of these benefits, nearly 70 percent of Texas children get less than 20 minutes of vigorous physical activity daily.[7] Many children are not getting exercise in or out of school. For example, half of all high school students in Texas do not play on a sports team, and half do not attend a PE class. At the elementary and middle school levels, Texas schools are required to provide 30 minutes of PE a day, but it is not clear how much moderate or vigorous physical activity children are getting during that time period.[8]

One-quarter of Texans are not physically active

Across the state, a high number of adults ages 20 and over report no leisure-time physical activity.



Source: County Health Rankings and Roadmaps 2016

Three strategies to increase physical activity in Texas schools

Research shows that, if properly structured, PE, classroom activity breaks, and recess can increase the amount of time children spend engaged in moderate to vigorous physical activity and reduce their risk of obesity.

1 High-quality physical education (PE)

High-quality PE programs that utilize a strong curriculum, good equipment, and fitness assessments can boost children's daily physical activity and improve their fitness and academic performance. For example, one rigorous study showed that adolescents who participated in a high-quality, daily physical education program reduced their odds of becoming an overweight adult by 28 percent.[9]

There are three best practices to get kids active during PE:

- **Use a high-quality curriculum:** The best curricula focus on making PE fun and inclusive, incorporating a variety of games, exercises and sports–from dance, to strength training, to soccer.[10] An evaluation of one high-quality PE curriculum found that it tripled the percentage of students who passed a fitness assessment.[11]
- **Provide resources for new equipment:** One school district experienced a 30 percent decline in student obesity rates following an investment in new exercise equipment and facilities.[12] Meanwhile, a study of the Texas Fitness Now program found that grants for PE equipment improved student fitness levels; however, the program did not impact obesity rates–likely because it was not paired with other quality improvements.[13]
- **Assess student fitness levels:** Texas' state FITNESSGRAM test assesses student fitness levels, which can help educators plan PE programs that are relevant to students' needs and share best practices with other schools, and encourage students to set personal, realistic goals for improvement.[14]

2 In-class physical activity breaks

Schools can help children achieve at least 10 minutes of daily physical activity by getting them active in the classroom.[15] Rather than detract from academics, short periods of physical activity actually improve children's



The Alief school district uses PE and in-class physical activity to improve student health

The Alief Independent School District, which includes nearly 40 schools in southwest Houston, places a priority on helping students establish lifelong patterns of healthy behavior. The district recognizes physical activity as essential for learning and cognitive ability, and that it can boost attendance for both students and staff.

Armed with the knowledge of how movement benefits students, Alief ISD focuses on providing movement opportunities in a variety of ways throughout the school day. **Campuses make sure that daily schedules allow time for students to engage in physical activity, and have begun developing comprehensive school physical activity programs.** Physical education classes are structured to provide maximum movement opportunities for students. At the high school level, students wear heart rate monitors and focus on fitness activities three days per week. Students are able to see how hard they are working during their classes, and information can be emailed home. Activity choices are given to students to help drive engagement.

Alief also incorporates Action Based Learning to promote movement and academics. Teachers add movement to academic concepts they are already teaching, and PE teachers add content to movement. All new teachers to the district are provided with professional development on active learning. The district also promotes healthy snacks for meetings. Campuses have wellness champions who work to ensure that students and staff have opportunities to promote healthy activities throughout the year.

Source: Personal communication with Kelley Sullivan, Wellness Coordinator at the Alief ISD, on October 20, 2016.

attention and performance.[16] One rigorous study found that incorporating 20 minutes of physical activity into the school day significantly improved students' test scores in math, reading and spelling.[17]

Similarly, a randomized trial found that combining physical activity with math and language lessons boosted children's test scores by the equivalent of four months in learning gains. The lessons took place for 20 to 30 minutes three times a week, and students completed exercises such as "jumping on the spot 8 times to solve the multiplication sum 2 × 4."[18]

3 Structured Recess

If structured properly, children can accumulate another 20 minutes of physical activity during recess.[19] Currently, six elementary schools in Texas are experimenting with offering four short periods of daily recess with promising results.[20]

There are best practices to get kids active during recess, according to Active Living Research:

- **Well-trained recess supervisors:** Investing in training for recess supervisors, such as on how to organize games, can help increase active time during recess.[21]
- **Low-cost equipment:** Research shows that "providing students with equipment such as flying discs, plastic hoops, jump ropes, beanbags and balls" can increase the time kids spend being active during recess by 27 percent.[22]
- **Paint and markings to make games a part of the environment:** Painted markings for games like hopscotch and mazes can increase the amount of recess time children spend on physical activity by 32 percent.[23]

Policy Recommendation: Improve PE Quality in Texas

Texas policymakers should improve the quality of PE programs by requiring school districts to complete self-assessments of their PE programs, and report on the following quality measures:

- Amount of PE offered
- Curriculum standards
- Teacher credentials and professional development
- Student assessment
- Equipment and facilities
- Policies for withholding or allowing substitutions for PE

Conclusion

Our country needs each generation to be healthy in order to remain competitive and strong. The U.S. military, in particular, relies on a healthy and fit recruiting pool. Increasing the quality and quantity of physical activity in Texas schools is a critical step towards addressing the childhood obesity crisis and helping young adults qualify for military service should they choose to serve.

Endnotes

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