

A NEW GAME PLAN FOR AMERICA

Leaner, fitter and smarter kids by
getting healthy food and quality
physical education back in schools



CHAMPIONS
For America's Future

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Summary

As accomplished athletes and coaches, we frequently have the opportunity to share our love of sports with the next generation of children across America. But what we see is often discouraging because too many of America's children are:

- sedentary,
- overweight, and
- out-of-shape.

Childhood obesity in America has tripled in one generation and inactivity alone is now the fourth leading cause of death worldwide – on par with smoking. New research shows that inactivity is killing more than one in ten Americans.

This is a concern because, for American children, moderate to vigorous physical activity drops by 75 percent between ages 9 and 15.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has concluded that physical education is important for children's health and it can also improve their academic achievement.

Our schools can play a crucial role in changing our current game plan by offering American kids more nutritious food and by making sure all our children are becoming more active with physical education classes (PE) and other opportunities. Change must include getting parents involved. If done right, this new game plan can produce a new generation of Americans who eat healthier meals and exercise

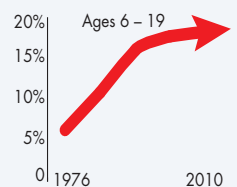
regularly. We need to help children see exercising – such as walking, riding a bike, or playing a sport – as something they do every day, like brushing their teeth.

To do this, however, we will need to change America's culture. The two most logical steps are to finish the job of getting quality PE back in schools and improving nutrition for students.

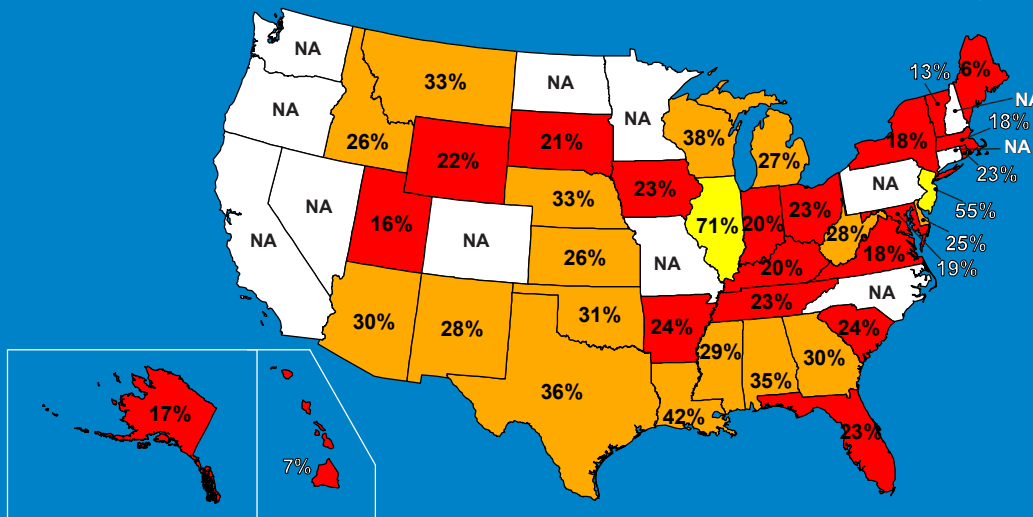
A New Game Plan for America

The old game plan isn't working:

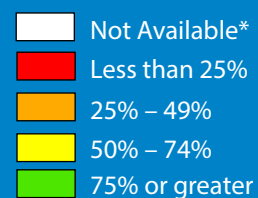
- Childhood obesity has tripled in one generation.¹
- Teens are not just more overweight today, many are obese – 17 percent of teenage girls are now suffering from childhood obesity, and for teen boys it's 20 percent.²
- Overweight children are more likely to become overweight or obese adults. For children ages 10 to 14 who are already too heavy, 75 percent will be overweight or obese as young adults. For comparison, only 10 percent of normal-weight children that age become overweight or obese in their twenties.³



Two out of three high school students do not attend PE daily.
But we do not even have data for many states.

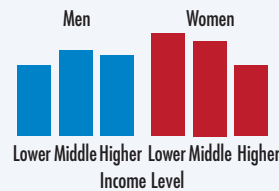


Proportion of 9th – 12th graders who attended physical education classes all 5 days in an average school week in 2011



*Did not participate in this survey.

- Most obese adults are not low-income. The epidemic of obesity is spreading to all income levels. In fact, middle- and higher-income men are more likely to be obese than poor men.⁴



This is costing America our competitive edge in business and endangering our national security:

- The Institute of Medicine reports that annual medical spending on obesity-related illness (such as diabetes and coronary artery disease) is now \$190 billion a year in America, equaling one in five dollars spent on health care in America.⁵
- When you add in lost productivity – increased absenteeism alone costs American businesses \$4.3 billion annually – the costs to the American economy are skyrocketing.⁶
- It is even a growing risk for our national security: one in four young Americans age 17 to 24 now have too much body fat to join the military.⁷

\$190 B



And, it is literally killing us:

Researchers now predict that the children growing up today will be the first generation of Americans to have a life expectancy lower than their parents.⁸ As the Director of the National Institutes of Health, Francis Collins, explained, "This is a tragedy. After all of these years of building up

our health care in order that people are saved from premature disability and death, we could lose these gains."⁹

For less-educated Americans, this is already happening. For example, white women who lack a high school degree are dying five years earlier than in the recent past. One of the reasons given for this shocking decline in life expectancy is excessive weight gain.¹⁰

We Need A New Game Plan for Activity at School

As athletes and coaches, our focus is on increasing children's physical fitness.

When it comes to PE, there aren't even consistently accurate nationwide data being collected about which students are getting PE – as the map on page 1 shows.¹¹ The data that we do have show that two out of three high school students in America do not attend PE daily.¹²



Policymakers will need to ask schools to provide data on which children in different grades receive physical education classes, how many days they receive them, and for how many minutes each day. That is not all: they will also need to know how much time during those PE classes students are actually engaged in moderate to vigorous activity. The 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, issued by the Department of Health and Human Services, recommends that children have 60 minutes a day of moderate to vigorous physical activity in order to be healthy.¹³ Moderate activity is similar to walking quickly to a meeting you are late for and vigorous activity is running to that meeting.¹⁴ Hopefully, 30 minutes of that moderate to vigorous activity will come from PE.

INNOVATIONS IN PE

For many kids, PE only reinforces their view that physical activity is embarrassing and something best avoided. SPARK, CATCH and other innovative curricula for quality PE promote games that are fun, keep everyone moving, and build physical skills and endurance.³⁸ The goal is to help children build friendships through physical activity and discover healthy activities they can incorporate into their life beyond school. If physical activity inside and outside of school doesn't give children the opportunity to be with friends and walk, play, ride bikes and do sports that are fun, they are unlikely to integrate activity into their daily routines for the rest of their lives.



Additional efforts to encourage other activities besides PE are needed, including:

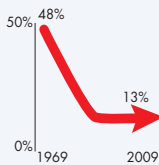
- recess,
- activity breaks,
- active after-school programs,
- intramurals,
- organized sports,
- community access to school sports facilities, and
- walking or biking to school.

But quality PE is as central to keeping kids active as a healthy lunch is to good nutrition. We need to make sure every school serves healthy food and has quality PE for all its students.

Newer PE curricula emphasize games that keep kids more active and are also more fun for everyone, not just the more experienced athletes in the class.¹⁵

We don't have data over the last 50 years to know what's happened with PE attendance. The available data going back to the 1990s does not show a sharp decline although it's possible there was

a decline in previous decades. It is clear however that significantly fewer children are walking or biking to school. From 1969 to 2009, the percent of children walking or biking to school has dropped from 48 percent to 13 percent.¹⁶



A new analysis of data on American adults shows that "In just 44 years (approximately 1.5 generations), physical activity in the United States has declined 32 percent and is on track for a 46 percent drop by 2030."¹⁷ Modern American life increasingly is dominated by less active office jobs, less walking to work, and less physical domestic chores, and the analysis showed that today "being physically active in leisure time doesn't come close to compensating for the overall drop in physical activity in other areas of life."¹⁸

Physical Activity:
↓ 32%

Adolescents who participated all five weekdays in physical education decreased their odds of becoming an overweight adult by 28 percent.

– Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine

To turn this around and get more children active for life, we will need to ensure that children have opportunities to be active and are incorporating active living routinely into their lives, just as they should be incorporating eating healthier foods daily before they become overweight.

One of the world's leading medical journals, The Lancet, recently reported that physical inactivity,

by itself, is the fourth leading cause of death worldwide, "on par with both smoking and obesity."¹⁹ For those who are inactive, this is due to increased risk from "major killers such as breast and colon cancer, type 2 diabetes and heart disease." Inactivity, the researchers found, accounts for "roughly one out of every 10 deaths globally," and the rate is similar in the United States: 10.8 percent of all deaths.²¹⁰

This does not have to be. A study in the Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine showed that adolescents who participated every weekday in physical education decreased their odds of becoming an overweight adult by 28 percent.²¹

It is not easy to increase children's overall physical activity and lower their body mass index (BMI).²² But despite the challenges, the basic point remains: research shows it is possible to get children active during PE, and it can matter, both for children's risk of becoming overweight and for preventing later disease whether they are overweight or not.²³

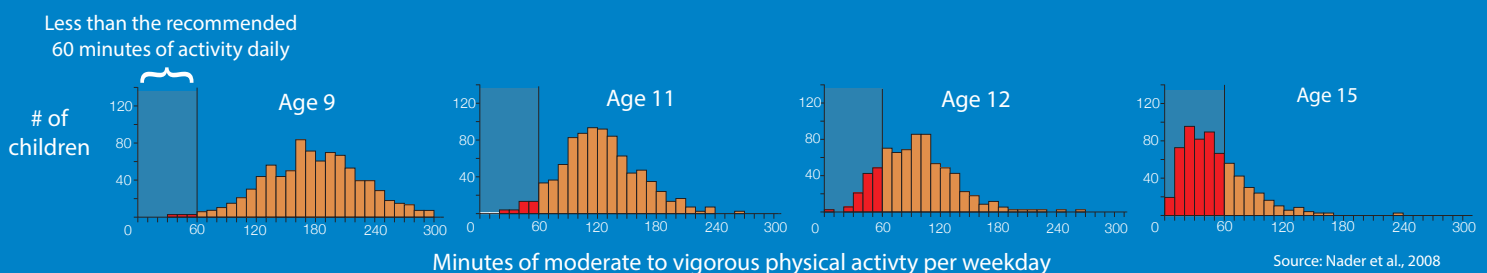
TEENS BECOME LESS ACTIVE

Most young children have a hard time staying still and usually do not need much prodding to stay active for 60 or more minutes a day. However, without recess and PE at many schools and with increasing use of sedentary video games at home, some young children are becoming inactive.³³ Children in their early years can develop interests in sports and habits of staying active that can last a lifetime. They are also rapidly developing their gross motor skills. So activity for younger children needs to be encouraged.³⁴

It is the teenage years, however, when youth are more likely to be found lounging on the couch with a TV remote in one hand and a phone in the other. **For American children, moderate to vigorous physical activity drops by 75 percent between age 9 and age 15.**³⁵

Designing ways to get and keep teens active is more challenging but it can be done. It certainly needs to include routine and quality PE in middle and high school. PE introduces older children and teens to activities that help them make new friends, keep them active, and can be done for the rest of their lives.

At age nine, only a few children average less than 60 minutes of activity per day and many get 180 minutes or more. But by age 15, children do not get enough exercise and show up in the red zone: below 60 minutes a day.



Smarter, happier children

Some argue that America's schools don't have time for PE because they need to focus on students' academic achievement. But research confirms that physical activity can actually increase cognitive alertness. As the New York Times summarized one study, "Among more than a million 18-year-old boys who joined the [Swedish] army, better fitness was correlated with higher I.Q.'s, even among identical twins. The fitter the twin, the higher his I.Q."²⁴

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has reviewed the available research studies on physical education at school. It concluded that eleven of the 14 studies found that PE enhanced academic achievement, three of the studies found no statistically significant impact on academic performance, and none found that PE hurt academic performance.²⁵

Inactivity is associated with more mental health problems for children while physical activity can offer some help with improving mental health.²⁶ A recent study showed that 20 minutes of moderate physical activity can help children with ADHD to improve their math and reading scores.²⁷ The evidence is even stronger if children maintain their physical activity levels as adults. For example, the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry reported that, "The efficacy of exercise in decreasing symptoms of depression has been well established."²⁸

Finally, as those of us who have participated in elite sports know so well, one's best friends are often the pals you make while playing pick-up basketball games in the park,

FitnessGram

FitnessGram is a fitness assessment and reporting program for youth, that measures aerobic capacity, muscular strength, endurance, flexibility, and also body composition. States such as California, Texas, New Jersey, Kansas, Georgia, and North Carolina adopted the program in their schools.³⁶ The President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition has recently transitioned from measuring performance using the traditional President's Challenge Youth Fitness Test to assessing health using FitnessGram. The new effort includes the FitnessGram assessment, professional development for staff, and motivational recognition of the students to empower them to adopt and maintain an active lifestyle.³⁷

FitnessGram can also help educate parents. As the saying goes, "What gets measured gets done." Given the childhood epidemic of obesity and inactivity, we need to help parents to become as aware of their children's body mass index (BMI) and physical fitness levels as they are their children's academic grades.

walking to school, or playing organized sports. Playing Frisbee in the park with friends or, later in life, a good walk with friends on the golf course are not mere diversions from the important work in life, but are essential ingredients for a happy, healthy life.

We Also Need to Finish the New Game Plan for School Nutrition

The research shows that increasing children's physical activity has many benefits beyond helping to reduce children's weight problems. But the research also shows we will not succeed in reversing the epidemic of childhood obesity by relying on changing children's activity levels alone. We also have to get schools and parents to change what children are consuming.

Parents and others have been complaining for years that too many schools are part of the problem, not part of the solution. School meals have often included unhealthy options. Even when parents packed a healthy lunch for their kids, many children were getting unhealthy food and drinks from vending machines or school stores instead of consuming what their parents sent with them.

Progress on childhood obesity is possible

Though it is not easy, the good news is that progress in turning around this epidemic of obesity is possible. New York City, Philadelphia and the state of Mississippi have seen their child obesity rates for school children drop by 5 percent, 5 percent and 13 percent, respectively, by changing what children eat in schools, getting them more active, and finding ways to educate both the children and their parents about eating healthier food and staying active.³⁹

Thanks to new legislation, that is changing. Schools are already serving healthier meals, and soon schools will have to remove unhealthy options from their vending machines, stores and cafeteria lines if new regulations that Congress originally directed the Department of Agriculture to develop are adopted.

This is an important step for two reasons:

- Children can get up to 40 to 50 percent of their calories from school;²⁹ and
- It is impossible for schools to effectively teach children to alter their eating habits if schools are also selling unhealthy options to their students.

Children who have grown up accustomed to a ready supply of less-healthy food will need time to adapt to healthier meals. Across the nation there are schools that have already

Leave all afternoon for exercise and recreation, which are as necessary as reading.

– Thomas Jefferson

made this transition, and they are showing that their students can adjust, while polls are finding that students and parents support the changes.³⁰

Focus on two crucial steps to increase physical activity in schools

America is finally making progress in improving the quality of food children are obtaining at school and we need to finish the job by removing unhealthy food from vending machines and other sites. Much more progress is needed, however, in getting kids to be active at school. Athletes and coaches are especially well-placed to help make that happen. There is a long list of things that can, and should, be done to increase physical activity both inside and outside of school. But two things are central and should be top priorities:

- 1) Reliable reporting on what is happening: Just as high school graduation rates are gaining more attention and action now that they are more accurately measured, each state should make sure that PE is being reported accurately. We need to know:
 - who is getting served;
 - how often;
 - for how long; and
 - whether the programs meet the goal of keeping kids moderately to vigorously active for 30 minutes of the recommended 60 minutes a day.³¹
- 2) Quality PE for all kids: Once policymakers and parents are fully aware of what's happening, schools should adopt quality PE that actually keeps kids active and having fun for 30 minutes a day, every school day, and for all kids. This can help reduce children's risk of becoming obese and increase their academic performance, and it will help them become fitter and healthier.³² As a nation, we have recognized that it is our schools' responsibility to serve healthy food to our children. We should also agree that PE is as central to keeping kids physically fit as a healthy lunch is to keeping them well-nourished. Our goal should be for every school to provide quality PE for all its students.

Conclusion: Helping All Children to Compete in Life

We have a long way to go to get our children eating healthier foods and becoming more active. Most children will not be future Olympians or professional athletes, but all of our children should be active and eat healthier food so they can be fitter and smarter and successfully compete in life. As accomplished athletes and coaches, we know about setting and reaching longer-term goals. Turning around the childhood obesity epidemic and getting kids more active is the new game plan America needs. It won't happen overnight, but we are confident that America can do this.

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