



As schools' gym classes and recesses disappear, districts must get creative to help fight childhood obesity

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Sierra Smith, 12, flees from pursuer Joshua Eston, 12, at Orchard Middle School in Solon, in a game of ball tag. Both children are sixth-graders. Solon schools offer "structured recess" to ensure that kids stay active. SOLON, Ohio -- Sure, video games, TV, sugary drinks and fatty foods have contributed to an alarming rise in childhood obesity, but there's plenty of blame to go around.

Parents are often too busy or too wary to let youths roam from sunup to sundown, as in generations past. Sprawling suburbs may have no sidewalks, making parks, ball fields and basketball courts hard to reach. Urban neighborhoods may be too violent to guarantee safe passage.

Oh, well, there's always good old school gym class.

Then again, maybe not.

The nation's schools, with a captive audience most of the year, are well positioned to ensure that kids get the hour of daily activity that experts say they need. But many schools fall far short because schedules are

loaded with closely followed standardized-test subjects like math and reading, or because tight budgets have made physical education expendable.

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Most states, including Ohio at the elementary-school level, allow local school districts to determine how much time to spend each week on physical education, according to the "Shape of the Nation Report," released recently by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. The group has been studying the subject since 1987, long before first lady Michelle Obama made fighting obesity a crusade.

Though more states are requiring physical education, a dozen states don't require any physical-education credit to graduate, and most of the others mandate minimal amounts. Substitutes, like sports or band, are permitted in 32 states, and 22 states allow the credits to be earned online. Ohio high school students must complete a half-credit, equal to 120 hours of instruction; substitutes and online work are allowed.

Young kids cannot even count on recess. Even though studies show physical activity helps students perform better academically, nearly a third of U.S. elementary schools do not regularly schedule recess, according to the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, created by the American Heart Association and the William J. Clinton Foundation in 2005.

From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- The prevalence of obesity among children, ages 6 to 11, increased from 6.5% in 1980 to 19.6% in 2008.
- The prevalence of obesity among adolescents, ages 12 to 19, increased from 5 percent to 18.1 percent.

From Harris Interactive's 2008 study:

"Go Out and Play: Youth Sports in America." The study, commissioned by the Women's Sports Foundation, was a nationally representative study of 2,185 students.

- Nearly 1 in 6 were physically active one day a week or less.
- 1 in 4 were active two days per week or less.

From "Shape of the Nation: Status of Physical Education in the USA," National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2010:

- NASPE recommends that schools provide 150 minutes of physical education per week for elementary students and 225 minutes per week for middle and high school students.

Physical activity guidelines for children and adolescents from the U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services:

- Engage in at least 60 minutes of physical activity daily.
- Most of the 60 or more minutes a day should be either moderate or vigorous aerobic activity, such as running, swimming, dancing and bicycling.
- Muscle-strengthening activities (gymnastics, lifting weights and push-ups, for example) should be included in that 60 minutes at least three days a week.
- Bone-strengthening physical activities (jumping rope, basketball and tennis, for example) are recommended at least three days a week.

From "The State of Play," a Gallup online survey for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, February 2010, conducted in October 2009, 1,951 elementary school principals or deputy/assistant principals:

- More than 80 percent of principals said recess has a positive impact on academic achievement.
- Ninety-six percent said recess has a positive impact on social development.

The cost of doing nothing about childhood obesity is high. The problem affects nearly one in five children nationwide, according to estimates, and places them at increased risk of heart disease, diabetes and other serious conditions.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the number of obese children ages 6 to 11 tripled between 1980 and 2008, rising from 6.5 percent to 19.6 percent. The number more than tripled in the 12-to-19 age group, from 5 percent to 18.1 percent.

University Hospitals' 5-year-old Healthy Kids, Healthy Weight program helps seriously overweight children ages 4 to 18 learn about the importance of exercise and nutrition. The children come one day a week for 12 weeks, getting in 25 minutes of physical activity during a two-hour class.

"We're seeing kids who are 300 and 400 pounds," exercise physiologist Brooke Starkoff said. "We're seeing kids who are 50 percent body fat, 60 percent body fat. Boys should be 12 to 17 percent, girls 20 to 25 percent."

The Cleveland Clinic last year opened a clinic for children with obesity and handles about 20 cases in the 2½ days it operates each week. The young patients complain of stomachaches and cramping and suffer from problems such as fatty deposits in their livers or high cholesterol.

Parents and families bear primary responsibility for helping children lead healthy lives, but schools can send a message about the importance of getting and staying active, said Gordon Blackburn, an exercise physiologist involved with the clinic. He said a school's influence can be particularly strong in the earlier grades.

"The kids haven't developed a life of sedentary living at that point. They're malleable," Blackburn said. "It's a great time to plant the seed."

School officials recognize the value of physical education and activity but often respond by saying that there is only so much time in the day and money in the budget.

'Healthy Choices' bill pared down

Pushback from school groups caused Ohio's new "Healthy Choices for Healthy Children" legislation to go from what proponents said would be a front-runner in reform to what they now call a good first step.



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Jenna Cooper, 7, a first-grader at Roxbury Elementary School in Solon, works the Hula-Hoops on the playground.

The original proposal would have mandated that all students in Ohio get 30 minutes of "moderate to rigorous" physical activity each day, starting in 2011. The version that became law gives districts the option to join a pilot program with that requirement, rewarding those that do with a notation on their state report cards.

Had the first bill passed, high school students would have needed a full credit in phys ed to graduate, with no exemptions for interscholastic sports, marching band or cheerleading. Those proposals disappeared.

Schools will have to measure the body mass indexes of students in kindergarten and the third, fifth and ninth grades. But districts facing financial hardship can apply for waivers.

As the legislation wound toward passage, advocates, including health-care institutions, insurers and corporations, argued that reducing obesity in children could help rein in health-care expenses.

But school groups countered with an economic argument of their own, successfully fending off provisions that they said would further strain finances. School officials feared the physical-activity requirement would force them to extend the school day by 30 minutes.

The Buckeye Association of School Administrators went from foe to supporter after legislators discarded parts of the legislation that the group found objectionable.

"This is a discussion that belongs in 614 school districts in the state of Ohio, not in the Statehouse," Tom Ash, spokesman for the group, said in an interview. "We are in 100 percent agreement that we have to get kids away from TV screens and have their computer social networks set aside so they get some physical activity."

Sponsor and State Sen. Kevin Coughlin said schools can creatively tuck 30 minutes of physical activity into the existing day -- for example, by having students sit on exercise balls in math class or run in place during "energizer breaks." He hopes that districts will voluntarily take steps and launch a fitness craze.

"I think some competitive spirit between the school districts will take hold," said Coughlin, a Cuyahoga Falls Republican. "I think some of our school districts will want to show their communities, their staffs, their voters that they are doing the right thing for our kids and our schools."

2 Ohio schools recognized for efforts

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation recently honored 179 U.S. schools for promoting physical activity and healthy eating. Ohio had two winners: Charles L. Warstier Elementary School in the Plain district, near Canton, and Struthers Middle School, near Youngstown.



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Fifth-graders Anuraag Atluri, holding disc, evades Erick Delgado in a game of Capture the Flag on the playground of Orchard Middle School. Solon schools' "structured recess" gives kids activity and helps them concentrate in the latter part of each day.

Warstier Elementary promotes regular one-minute breaks in which students stretch, jump up and down or roll their shoulders. The school also distributed a book on healthy living to students to share with their families, electronically quizzed students on the content and rewarded the first respondents by letting them lead exercises at daily assemblies.

Struthers Middle School enlisted local fitness dancers to work with staff and students. The school also started serving healthier meals and snacks.

States are taking action, but individual schools don't need to wait for stronger state policies, said Ginny Ehrlich, executive director of the New York-based Alliance for a Healthier Generation. She said schools can seek grants to pay for initiatives, work with community organizations to provide programs before and after school or encourage exercise breaks.

"If you have a creative and committed school leader and faculty, they find ways to do it," she said.

The amount of phys ed offered in Ohio schools depends on where physical education ranks in priority, said Cynthia Meyer, president of the Ohio Association of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.

"In some districts, they value physical education and provide a lot of time in the instructional day for that," she said. "In some districts, it's the first thing to go when they cut budgets."

In the Cleveland area, the Shaker Heights school system has been going the extra mile, Meyer said.

Under longstanding practice, students in kindergarten through sixth grade receive 90 minutes of physical education a week. Those in the seventh and eighth grades get 200 minutes a week for three-fourths of the school year; the remainder of the year that time is devoted to teaching health.

To graduate, Shaker Heights High School students need a full credit of physical education, earned in four semesters spread over four years. Students who are in sports or who take a movement-oriented theater class can substitute all or part of that time.

Solon school officials use a highly organized recess to ensure that kids in kindergarten through sixth grade get daily workouts.

The program, started several years ago, divides the playground into four zones where students take part in varying activities, depending on their interests and energy. Paid parent monitors encourage students to participate in games, engage in "free play" or simply walk, said Tammy Strom, district spokeswoman.

Children who misbehave might be shepherded to another zone but are no longer put "on the wall" to stand idly. Down time is frowned on because the children may get as little as an hour of gym per week.

Strom doesn't like references to "structured recess," maybe because some parents initially balked out of concern that the district was unduly restricting choice or not "letting kids be kids." She emphasizes the program's health, academic and social benefits.

"It's a commitment to make sure kids are able to be active and engaged and having fun at recess," Strom said.

Despite budget problems, states have made some recent progress in increasing the amount of physical education and activity in schools, the "Shape of the Nation Report" found.

Louisiana has passed a law requiring students in kindergarten through eighth grade to have at least 30 minutes of physical education a day. The state became one of three -- Alabama and Florida are the others -- to meet the National Association for Sport and Physical Education's recommended minimum of 150 minutes per week in elementary school, the report says.

Missouri now requires elementary schools to provide at least 150 minutes of physical activity a week. Pennsylvania is considering mandating 30 minutes of daily activity for all students, with no exemptions for athletes.

Meyer sees more emphasis on physical education in Ohio's future if advocates keep a focus on its value in fighting obesity.

"People are starting to look at physical education as one of the answers. Not *the* answer, but one of the answers," she said. "I see it as the best of times for us if we can be out there answering some questions."

Video: How Orchard Middle School in Solon structures recess to help students fend off obesity, stay alert during school and even combat bullying.

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