Changing the Focus of Physical Education in NJ High Schools to help decrease the Growing Obesity Epidemic

Changing gym requirements in NJ to allow students to participate in activities they are passionate about, to improve adolescent health.

Tag words: Obesity in High School, NJ Obesity, Physical Education, Physical activity, Health Outreach

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The Issue: Obesity

Obesity epidemic:
One of America’s largest and growing epidemics is that of obesity. Obesity is determined by a person’s weight versus their height to calculate a body mass index (BMI) (CDC, 2010). One of the leading causes of obesity in our country is the tendency for people to lead a more sedentary life style. The CDC states that “Policy and environmental change initiatives that make healthy choices in nutrition and physical activity available, affordable, and easy will likely prove most effective in combating obesity.” (CDC, 2010) There is also a belief that obesity, poor health and nutrition begin at a young age. Promoting physical activity in children and young adults is an important step to helping end the obesity epidemic. (Tom Hanrahan)

Current Policies on Physical Activity and Education in High School

State Regulations and Policies for Physical Education
There are currently 6 national standards for national physical education determined by the National Standard for Physical Education.

- Standard 1: Demonstrates competency in motor skills and movement patterns needed to perform a variety of physical activities. (NASPE, 2010).
- Standard 2: Demonstrates understanding of movement concepts, principles, strategies, and tactics as they apply to the learning and performance of physical activities. (NASPE, 2010).
- Standard 3: Participates regularly in physical activity. (NASPE, 2010).
- Standard 4: Achieves and maintains a health-enhancing level of physical fitness. (NASPE, 2010).
- Standard 5: Exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others in physical activity settings. (NASPE, 2010).
- Standard 6: Values physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression, and/or social interaction. (NASPE, 2010).

According to the Center for Disease Control, physical activity reduces the risk of premature mortality, coronary heart disease, hypertension, colon cancer, and diabetes mellitus. Also, participation in regular activity starting from adolescence may enhance strength and endurance, develop health bones and muscles, improve weight control, decrease stress and anxiety, and increase self-esteem. In order to maintain a physically active lifestyle, a proper foundation must be laid down during childhood. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends that children and teenagers (from ages 6 to 17) require at least 60 minutes of daily physical activity. However, a 2007 research study showed that only 35% of high school students had actually included 60 minutes of activity per day while only 30% participated in a physical education class everyday. Current research shows that the amount of time spent for physical activity significantly decreases with age.

According to School Health Policies and Programs Study (SHPPS) 2006, 95.2% of high schools required physical education and 30.9% allowed students to be exempted. However, only 3% of high schools provided physical education for at least 3 days per week for the entire school year. In 2005, the National Conference of State Legislatures showed that only two states, New York and Illinois, required mandatory state physical education with a standard duration or frequency. Most states had required physical education but with no duration standards. Two states had absolutely no state requirement for physical education. In 2007, the CDC reported that 62% of high schools required teaching physical activity and fitness (not in physical education). 48.4% of
schools offered intramural activities or physical activity clubs with only less than a quarter of these schools providing transportation. 16% of the states allowed using physical activity as a means of punishment for bad behavior. However, more than half of the states actively discourage this practice. As of now, there is no federal requirement for schools to include mandatory physical education. (Paul So and Ryan Lapidus)

**Physical Activity Recommendations for Teens**

In adolescents and young adults, physical activity does not need to be strenuous to be beneficial. In fact, about 60 minutes a day of physical activity each day is recommended by the Center for Disease Control in order to prevent disease and maintain weight. This 60 minutes does not need to occur all at once in a day, and it has been found that 20 minute intervals are just as beneficial as 60 minutes at once, for general health. Studies show that only 19% of all high school students are physically active for 20 minutes or more, five days a week, in physical education classes. Well developed physical education programs have been shown to greatly improve the activity level of high school students across the country.

Currently, in New Jersey, the law requires at least 150 minutes of physical education each week. This would be approximately 30 minutes, five days a week. This requirement falls flat by at least 30 minutes each day, and does not take into account the two days of the weekend, in which there are no requirements. (Emily Bostrom)

**Benefits of Physical Activity in Teens**

Proper physical activity can help young adults build and maintain healthy muscles, joints and bones, control weight, reduce overall body fat and build lean muscle. It can also prevent or slow down the development of hypertension and other long term diseases that may develop as a result of a sedentary lifestyle. These diseases may include obesity, type 2 diabetes, hyperlipidemia, metabolic disorder and many others.

In this population, excessive exercise can lead to injuries, menstrual abnormalities and bone weakening, since adolescents and young adults are still growing and developing. (Emily Bostrom)

**First Lady Michelle Obama’s Physical Activity Initiative**

On February 9, 2010, President Obama signed a memorandum creating a task force on childhood obesity. This initiated Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign, her national public awareness campaign against childhood obesity. The program stems from her own experiences as a mother, realizing how easy it is feed your children with quick, easy and unhealthy options like fast food because of time constraints and other factors. After the doctor showed concern with her two daughters BMI, she made changes to their diet such as lowering portion size and replacing soda with water. The aim of her initiative is not body weight, size, or BMI but children’s overall health.

The campaign has four parts: helping parents make better food choices, serving healthier food in school vending machines and lunch lines, making healthy food more available and affordable, and encouraging children to exercise more. Mrs. Obama wants to aim at solving the obesity problem in children so that they can reach adulthood at a healthy weight. The “Let’s Move” panel has 90 days since the signing of the memorandum to come up with a plan for solving the problem. (Wayne Lewis Jr)
The Service Project: Our Plan

Our plan is to ensure all high school students will participate in sufficient regular physical activity to prevent and/or decrease the incidence of obesity and health-related risks contributed by obesity. To do this we wish to enact a program that gives high school students the option to substitute physical education with a certified physical activity of their choosing. For example: instead of gym a student can choose to take, martial arts, dance, or a sport after school. The students will have to complete 150 minutes of this sport a week in order to pass physical education. This plan will ensure kids get the physical activity while participating in an activity they enjoy. In order to do this we will send a bill to the New Jersey legislature, which can be seen in the appendices. (Paul So and Wayne Lewis Jr)

References

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SHPPS 2006
Appendices

1. **Title of Bill:** Reformation of Physical Education In High Schools
2. **Authors:** Emily Bostrom, Tom Hanrahan, Ryan Lapidus, Wayne Lewis Jr., Paul So
3. **Be It Enacted By The New Jersey State Congress**
   
   **Preamble:** Whereas obesity is a growing epidemic in the United States, and since obesity contributes to health risks such as Cardiovascular Disease, non-insulin dependent diabetes, hypertension, etc, and since a physically active lifestyle greatly reduces the risk of obesity, and since healthy habits should be formed during adolescence in order to ensure good health in adulthood and since the New Jersey public school system is lacking in time and resources required to facilitate the recommended amount of physical activity for students

4. **SECTION 1:** This act may be cited as, “Physical Education Reform Bill.”

5. **SECTION 2:** High School physical education requirements will be fulfilled by giving students the option of replacing gym with an elective related to a physical activity of their interest.

6. **SECTION 3:** A committee will be formed to oversee:
   1. **Sub-SECTION A:** Students’ participation in the program
   2. **Sub-SECTION B:** What activities will qualify for Phys. Ed. Requirement.
   3. **Sub-SECTION C:** School district compliance in program
   4. **Sub-SECTION D:** Facilities that provide alternative Phys. Ed. Activities.

7. **SECTION 4:** Programs allowed to be included in the “alternative gym” program must be pre-accredited prior to student participation.
   1. **Sub-SECTION A:** Programs will be evaluated by the committee as stated above to become passed as an “accredited program”.
   2. **Sub-SECTION B:** Program accreditation will be based on program facilities, ability to have student supervision, duration, availability and commitment to ensuring standards are met for students.

8. **SECTION 5:** If students choose to participate in the alternative program, they must pass the program in order to receive gym class credit.

9. **SECTION 6:** Students must complete 150 minutes of alternative Phys. Ed. each week to fulfill state physical education requirements.

10. **SECTION 7:** Program will go into effect 2 school years after bill is passed.
All across America, teenagers have been slowly eating their way towards a fat-induced disease. Most people believe that this is catalyzed by the growth in the fast food industry. However, we fail to consider a critical factor: physical activity. The amount of time spent participating in activity have dramatically decreased in teenagers in the past few years. They consume more hours in front of the television or computer than they do under the sun. To make things worse, the one place where teenagers should be getting their daily physical activity, in school, is not effective.

Dr. Fagan and her students are proposing a solution to make physical activity in high school not only effective but also desirable. One of the many reasons students do not participate during gym class is because of their lack of interest in the activity. A way to combat this is to provide a wider range of sports and exercises. Since not every student enjoys playing football, an alternative such as aerobics will allow everyone to participate in regular physical activity.

Another issue that will be addressed is ensuring that every student engage in activity a few times a week. The Center for Disease Control recommends that teenagers should have a minimum of thirty minutes of activity for at least five times a week. By having the students participate in a mandatory minimum amount of time spent on physical activity, either inside or outside of school, we can warrant that they are receiving sufficient exercise. One way to aid this is by providing more after school activities focused around staying active.

These are just a few of many propositions in guiding teenagers to have a healthy and active lifestyle. More importantly, it will help prevent the growth of obesity in the future. As we put the light on the importance of staying active, there will be one less disease causing issue we won’t need to worry about.
“Get Moving” on Improving High School Physical Education

By Emily Bostrom

Just take a look at New Jersey’s high school population, and you will see that there is a clear obesity problem in our schools. It is not just high school students, but current research shows that as age increases, physical activity level decreases dramatically in young adults. This, along with poor nutrition, is the direct cause of obesity, which can lead to many other serious health problems including hypertension, metabolic disorder, and type two diabetes. It is clear that in order to stop these growing problems, something must be changed about the way that young adults are living.

Current physical activity requirements in the state of NJ are 150 minutes of physical education each week. This evens out to only 30 minutes a day in high schools; much less after time is allowed for changing clothes before and after class and taking roll. With so little required of our High School students, it is no wonder that there is an obesity problem in this population. The Center for Disease Control recommends that young adults get at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day to maintain weight and prevent chronic disease. This is twice the current requirement provided in High Schools. Clearly, there is quite a disconnect between the recommendation (fully supported by much clinical and epidemiological research) and the requirements.

By adopting a new, more diverse physical education plan for NJ High Schools, there can be an improved health profile of our students, not to mention the many other benefits of exercise (including improved self-esteem and grades.). There is no room to lose in the fight against adolescent obesity. If changes are not made now, then it will be too late for our High School students.
To whom it may concern,

Here is a letter regarding the physical activity level of high school students and new physical education options.

Please accept this letter for publication.

Your kind assistance has been received. We all welcome you if we liked to use it.

- Op-Ed Editor of The Star-Ledger

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Give Children a Choice about Physical Education

By Wayne Lewis Jr.

Physical education is a course taken from kindergarten till high school to encourage psychomotor learning and physical health. This has been a required course for schools across the nation for decades but recently there has been a decline in the amount of physical education requirements in school. This along with bad eating habits has caused an increase in childhood obesity in our nation, yet not much has been done in order to rectify this problem.

With the current physical education system is in shambles. It is no surprise that children are becoming increasingly sedentary. With acts such as no child left behind threatening to reduce the time allotted for recess or gym in order to allow more time for classes. Those physical education classes that do remain are not very involved, especially in higher grade levels it appears to be more of a study hall that an activity.

That is why as of February 9, 2010 the first lady Michelle Obama has initiated her national public awareness campaign against childhood obesity called “Let’s move.” With this campaign she wants to aim at solving the obesity problem in children so that they can reach adulthood at a healthy weight.

Keeping Michelle Obama’s program in mind we would like to work towards reforming the current physical education programs in the nation. Our plan would involve offering students the option to take sports and physically active electives instead of gym. This would give children the option to do activities they really want to do after class such as martial arts, weight training and dance. The program would require students to complete 25-30 hours of outside activity, which is equivalent to an entire year worth of physical education. This program would allow children to be more active while becoming more adept at a sport. We are planning to send a letter to Michelle Obama discussing our plan in further details with the hope of her adopting it.