

# FactSheet

March 2014

## Physical Education

*A Slow Start to a Promising Educational Boost*

The data have been clear that physical activity is associated with improved cognitive development and academic performance. Policy has capitalized on these findings by mandating the amount of physical education (PE) time provided in California schools. Students in grades K-6 are to receive an average of 20 minutes a day and students in grades 7-12 are to receive an average of 40 minutes a day. Unfortunately, researchers are reporting that some California schools are not meeting this bar. These findings are disappointing, because physical education has been shown to be a one-way street to academic improvement. PE improves students' academic performance, while taking away instruction time in order to fit in PE has not been shown to result in lower test scores. Furthermore, it is important that schools not only allocate sufficient time to PE, but that the time spent on PE be of quality. Student health is affected by the level of physical activity.

PE also has implications for Local Control Funding Formula compliance, as PE fits into several of the eight state priority areas that must be considered in a school's Local Control and Accountability Plan. For example, research shows that student achievement, student engagement, and school climate will benefit from healthy students because spending quality time on physical activity helps K-12 students focus on academic work.

This fact sheet offers a quick reference to data released by the California Department of Education showing that California schools have made slight physical fitness gains and academic research on how PE is being implemented.<sup>1</sup>

### The bad news:

- » 82% of California's elementary students are not getting the required average of 20 minutes of PE per day.

### The good news:

- » Students who attend schools that comply with California PE law are 30% more likely to be physically fit.

## How does California measure physical fitness?

California has a transparent system for measuring which students are in what is known as the Healthy Fitness Zone, which is how the state defines being physically fit. Since 1996 California Education Code has required local educational agencies (LEA) to administer a physical fitness test to all students in grades five, seven and nine. The State Board of Education has designated the Fitness-gram developed by the Cooper Institute to test aerobic capacity, body composition, abdominal strength, trunk extensor strength, upper body strength, and flexibility. The test produces a measure of whether students are in the Healthy Fitness Zone in each of the six areas. Expectations vary by grade and gender.<sup>2</sup>

## What do schools do with the physical fitness data?

Schools provide students with their individual results. Additionally, data is compiled at the school, LEA, county and state level to be reported to the governor and Legislature, and is available on the California Department of Education's website. Furthermore, schools report their Fitness-gram results in their School Accountability Report Cards.

## Fitnessgram results

About 1.34 million California fifth-, seventh-, and ninth-graders took the Fitnessgram test in 2013. The California Department of Education reported that 26% of fifth-graders, 32% of seventh-graders, and 37% of ninth-graders ranked in the Healthy Fitness Zone for all six areas, which marks a slight increase from 2012 for fifth- and seventh-graders and approximately no change for ninth-graders. About half or more of students at the three grade levels ranked in the Healthy Fitness Zone in five or six of the six areas (49% of fifth-graders, 55% of seventh-graders, and 59% of ninth-graders).



### A Caution

Students who attend schools that mainly serve low-income students may spend less time in PE than the average California student. These were the findings of researchers who observed PE classes at 34 income-stratified elementary, middle, and high schools.<sup>3</sup>

## Questions for board members to consider

- » How do we keep ourselves accountable for the mandated amounts of quality time that students should spend in PE?
- » Are we providing adequate PE professional development to staff?
- » Does our staff have the appropriate resources for PE?
- » Do we set internal goals for our Fitnessgrams and how that data are shared with staff?
- » How are we motivating and empowering our students to be physically fit?

## For further information

- » CSBA Web page on physical activity and education [www.csba.org/PE](http://www.csba.org/PE)
- » President's Council on Fitness, Sports, and Nutrition [www.fitness.gov](http://www.fitness.gov)
- » California Health and Human Services Let's Get Healthy Campaign [www.chhs.ca.gov/pages/LGHCTF.aspx](http://www.chhs.ca.gov/pages/LGHCTF.aspx)

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *California Students Make Slight Gains in Physical Fitness*, California Department of Education (2013). Retrieved from [www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr13/yr13rel105.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr13/yr13rel105.asp)
- <sup>2</sup> Physical Fitness Testing Web page, California Department of Education [www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/pf/](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/pf/)
- <sup>3</sup> *Physical Education and Student Activity: Evaluating Implementation of a New Policy in Los Angeles Public Schools*, The Society of Behavioral Medicine (2013).