

Students more likely to be fit when physical education is mandatory

May 2 2012, By Sharyn Alden, Contributing Writer

Fifth graders in California public school districts that comply with the state's mandatory physical education requirement are more likely to have better fitness levels than students in districts that don't comply, according to a new study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

“Even though California has a [physical education](#) law and monitors its compliance, our study revealed that many school districts are not providing the required physical education and too many children go to school in districts that do not comply with physical education laws,” said Emma V. Sanchez-Vaznaugh, Sc.D., the study's lead author and assistant professor of health education at San Francisco State University.

Grade school children spend a large portion of their day in school, giving educators a unique opportunity to influence life-long health habits. Children who are less physically active are more likely to have poorer overall health and have an increased risk for obesity.

California has a law that makes physical education mandatory for students in grades 1 to 6, requiring that each student receive 200 minutes of physical education every 10 days. Of the 55 school districts for which compliance data were available, only half were compliant.

Researchers found that students in policy-compliant school districts were 29 percent more likely to be physically fit, as measured by performance on a 1-mile run or walk test, than students in noncompliant districts.

Researchers also noted that individual schools might be more apt to comply if there was adequate funding for physical education and to monitor school compliance.

Charles T. Cappetta, M.D., adjunct associate professor of pediatrics at Dartmouth Medical School and founder of Granite State FitKids, a child health promotion organization, said, “Mandates are tough to implement. They are nice in theory, but usually don’t work. Still, this policy is a start. Just saying ‘do it’ does not necessarily translate. You need to have an environment or culture in place that supports physical activity and exercise.”

Sanchez-Vaznaugh said, “Parents, educators, policy makers, schools and people involved in children’s health need to figure out how to help schools adhere to physical education laws so that our children can get the needed physical education while in school.”

Provided by Health Behavior News Service

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