

Schools should provide opportunities for 60 minutes of daily physical activity to all students

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Given the implications for the overall health, development, and academic success of children, schools should play a primary role in ensuring that all students have opportunities to engage in at least 60 minutes per day of vigorous or moderate-intensity physical activity, says a new report from the Institute of Medicine. Recent estimates suggest that only about half of school-age children meet this evidence-based guideline for promoting better health and development. The report recommends that most daily physical activity occur during regular school hours in physical education classes, recess or breaks, and classroom exercises, with additional opportunities available through active commutes to and from school, before- and after-school programs, and participation in intramural or varsity sports.

"Schools are critical for the education and health of our children," said Harold W. Kohl III, professor of epidemiology and kinesiology at the University of Texas School of Public Health and chair of the committee that wrote the report. "They already provide key services such as health screenings, immunizations, and [nutritious meals](#). Daily physical activity is as important to children's health and development as these other health-related services, and providing opportunities for physical activity should be a priority for all schools, both through physical education and other options."

The report calls on the U.S. Department of Education to designate

physical education as a core academic subject to draw attention and attract the resources necessary to enhance content, instruction, and accountability. Although most states currently have laws addressing physical education requirements in schools, there are no consistent nationwide policies. The committee recommends that 30 minutes per day in elementary school and 45 minutes per day in middle and high schools be devoted to physical education, and students should spend at least half that time engaged in vigorous or moderate-intensity physical activity. But it emphasizes that physical education cannot be the sole source of physical activity; additional opportunities should exist throughout the school environment.

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, 44 percent of school administrators have reported cutting significant time from physical education and recess to devote more time to reading and mathematics in the classroom. But a growing body of evidence suggests that increasing physical activity and fitness may improve academic performance—especially in mathematics and reading—and that the benefits of engaging in physical activity during the school day outweigh the benefits of exclusive use of classroom time for academic learning.

A variety of physical activities that include aerobic and resistance exercises, structured and unstructured activities, and both short and longer sessions will likely confer the greatest benefits, the report says. For example, aerobic fitness is linked to brain structure and function related to working memory and problem solving, and single bursts of activity have been shown to increase time on task and improve focus. Recess provides students the chance to refine social skills and use their imaginations.

Along with a minimum number of minutes spent in physical education classes, students should also receive frequent classroom breaks, and recess should not be taken away as punishment or replaced with

additional academic instruction, the report adds. The report illustrates how scheduling physical education and recess on a daily and weekly basis can still allow for ample classroom time devoted to core subjects.

Ensuring equity in access to physical activity and [physical education](#) will require support from federal and state governments as well as state, district, and local education administrators, the report says. School systems at every level, together with city planners and parent-teacher organizations, should consider [physical activity](#) in all policy decisions related to the school environment.

Provided by National Academy of Sciences

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